Unbound Silk

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by fancywaffles

Summary

The Original Luo Binghe is the OG Protagonist (™) so the universe is designed to bend to him.

Coincidentally, Sha Yuan, shut-in demon cousin of Sha Hualing, receives a new character upgrade from the System and a quest with no details other than it's for the protagonist. He's met and been ignored by the Emperor multiple times over the years, so it's probably nothing.

(or, what happens when Bing-ge accidentally forces the universe into a friends to lovers plot)

Notes

This got away from me. It's really a "one-shot" but that felt absurd for ease of reading, so I split it into three parts. Bing-ge is not unhinged in this, just kind of a dick, so there are no big content warnings (if I missed any, please let me know). There are children in this, but I would not call it "kidfic" as they are mostly background.

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1: Part 1

Chapter Summary

Sha Yuan, royal babysitter.

Chapter Notes

~10.5k

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Shen Yuan transmigrated into the universe of *Proud Immortal Demon Way*, he'd immediately realized he was at least not on earth anymore. His pale skin that did not resemble the anemia he struggled with but rather an inhuman glow and sharp pointed claws gave it away.

Then a blue blaring flash behind his eyes confirmed it.

[The System was successfully activated! Bound role: Cousin to Sha Hualing, Saintess of the Demon Clan, future wife of Luo Binghe, 'Sha Yuan'. Starting B-Points: 50]

Obviously he remembered who Sha Hualing was, one of the Luo Binghe top three wives, but he definitely didn't remember any demon (which he was now) named the same as himself. That was immediately concerning, since Sha Hualing tended to have relationships that didn't exactly *continue living* with her family.

Maybe he was a generic NPC and not a hidden tragic part of Sha Hualing's backstory.

Mostly that turned out to be the case. Sha Yuan was twelve (to which Shen Yuan had cursed the System several times because making someone go through puberty twice was more hellish than becoming a demon) to Sha Hualing's fifteen. Sha Heiyin, Sha Hualing's auntie and Sha Yuan's demoness mother, was incredibly overprotective for a demon since apparently all of her other children had died horrible PIDW appropriate deaths.

An overprotective demon mother left Sha Yuan with a lot of leeway compared to an overprotective human one. Mostly he wasn't allowed to leave the demon realm (which was fine, he was going to wait out canon and not accidentally become a stepping stone on the Luo Binghe revenge train) and his 'quirk' of spending a lot of time reading was encouraged (though the fiction in the demon realm left a lot to be desired).

Being the strange shut-in demon noble from the Sha Clan had a lot of benefits. The biggest one was his wardrobe. The Southern Demon Realm was hot but not as hot as Sha Hualing or the rest of the clan seemed to think required gauzy strips of barely there fabric, so Sha Yuan could wear positively outlandish outfits for the majority of modesty politics but still feel covered. A sleeveless top and pants rather than six layers of a traditional set of cultivator robes was preferable when there was zero air conditioning.

He did *live* in the demon realm, so it wasn't like Sha Yuan never got out of the fortress. Transmigrating into a demon was legitimately awesome and most of his system quests involved befriending his cousin (easy, Sha Hualing loved having someone younger to tease) and training up his demon powers. He didn't have any cool elemental or plant powers, but his demon body was scores above his human one in terms of strength and dexterity. He put most of his earned B-Points into leveling up his martial skills and mastering his two forearm length dao butterfly swords.

He spent several years doing this without encountering any plot points (minus Sha Hualing coming back from her failed attack on Qiong Ding Peak with a new crush on her future husband). Then Luo Binghe started making waves in the Demon Realm to the point where even shut-ins heard about it.

"Luo Binghe has heavenly demon blood," Sha Yuan said to his mother, making the executive decision to avoid being canon fodder when Sha Hualing showed up. "It makes sense to support him and Ling-jie."

Sha Heiyin reached out and gently patted his cheek. "Your uncle would never yield. He'll consider it betraying all demon kind."

Sha Yuan didn't particularly like Jiuchong-jun. He wasn't punting him into walls, but he definitely made Sha Yuan feel like a piece of furniture whenever he entered a room. Sadly, Sha Yuan preferred his cousin's teasing. At least she noticed him.

"Do we… have to side with Uncle?"

His mother looked at him, like the concept was a breakthrough in scientific discovery! "I suppose it can't hurt to hear them out."

The 'backstab/betray demonkind' turned into an overdue coup and put the Sha Clan at head of the list for influence during Luo Binghe's conquering of the Demon Realm. Even more so when Luo Binghe went from Demon Lord to Emperor.

The merging of the realms had been an interesting but oft overlooked piece of description towards the end of the PIDW revenge arc and witnessing it in person was beyond anything a hack writer like Airplane could've described. The barren wasteland that Sha Yuan had grown accustomed to became filled with spirt grass, demonic beasts running freely, and a sky that fractured like a kaleidoscope with purples, greens, and blues.

Sha Yuan hadn't realized how much he missed real daylight until he had it again.

The Sha Clan, being ruled now by Sha Heiyin as Sha Hualing's proxy, thrived as it was the easiest area of Luo Binghe's territory to incorporate humans. And while Sha Hualing took most of the credit for this, Sha Yuan was not unaware that his constant advice of 'maybe don't eat or maul our new human neighbors' was a pretty big factor.

And Sha Yuan actually got to meet the *Luo Binghe* at Sha Hualing's wedding. It had been really cool for about five seconds before the guy veered off into other distractions. The increase in the Sha Clan's standing hadn't really done much about Sha Yuan's own standing so he tried not to take it personally. It was probably for the best he was off the Protagonist's radar.

He had meant to go exploring once things were settled, but didn't seem to manage staying away from the fortress for too long. Sha Heiyin's overprotectiveness seemed to settle into Sha Yuan's adulthood and he was very weak to making even demon mothers sad.

The book selection had picked up since the realms merged, so it wasn't too bad. Sha Hualing visited often (to 'check on her territory' which involved a lot of lounging around between needling and teasing him) — and occasionally Sha Yuan made himself useful by having needed information about non-*papapa* cures to whatever wife of the week was dealing with. He was absolutely certain that Sha Hualing was taking credit for these, but he was also more than a little certain she was using the information he'd given her about poisons too so Sha Yuan was fine being unacknowledged.

Overall, his second life had been kind of great. Probably boring by most in-universe standards, but for a NEET loner in his real life, being a demon from a respectable clan was a big upgrade.

Then, about fourteen years after the merging of the realms, Sha Hualing popped into his study via a freezing cold portal with Luo Binghe's second in command, Mobei-jun—and a baby.

She shoved said baby at Sha Yuan. "Yuan-er! Your Jiejie needs you to watch Feifei, while Husband and I take care of a tiny rebellion problem."

Luo Feiyue, the second eldest child of Luo Binghe, slapped a chubby hand on Sha Yuan's face.

"Uhhh," Sha Yuan said articulately, adjusting his sort-of-niece into a more secure hold. "Shouldn't she be at the palace?"

Sha Hualing laughed and shook her head, the tiny decorative pieces of silver jingled. "Like I'd trust those women."

The harem was in the triple digits now, so Sha Yuan couldn't completely blame her. Plus Feiyue was *really* cute. "Guess you're staying with Uncle Yuan," he said to Feiyue who slapped her hand on his mouth again.

"Mobei-jun will protect you—well he'll protect Feifei," Sha Hualing added, and then left out of the same portal, leaving the giant terrifying ice demon behind.

Sha Yuan looked up and then up some more at the second in command to the Demon Lord. It wasn't like Sha Yuan was *small* for a demon (he was certainly taller than Sha Hualing), but Mobei-jun was gigantic.

"Does the Northern Demon Clan leader require anything from this one?" Sha Yuan asked, not sure if offering tea would be some weird Northern insult.

"Do not harm the child," Mobei-jun said, flatly.

"Well yes, obviously," Sha Yuan said, shifting Feiyue in his arms. She was tugging on one of the few silver charms Sha Yuan wore and was shaking it to see if it jingled. Sha Yuan actually liked the chance to not announce his presence everywhere so it did not.

Feiyue had perfect little baby cheeks, flushed and as jade smooth as her mother's, but with more warmth in the color. She babbled at him and shook the charm again.

Sha Yuan snorted. "Okay, okay. We'll get you something that makes noise." He turned towards his bedroom, ignoring the feeling of cold ants crawling up and down his spine as Mobei-jun followed. There was a jewelry case on his vanity full of trinkets he never bothered with and he pulled out the biggest one to make sure it wasn't easy to swallow size and gave it to Feiyue.

Luo Feiyue gripped the charm and shook it violently, screeching with laughter when it made a loud bell sound.

"I'm assuming Sha Hualing didn't pack anything?" Sha Yuan asked, over his shoulder.

"No."

Ah a conversationalist. Sha Yuan wasn't sure how long a 'tiny' rebellion would take to quell, but he was fairly certain that even demon babies needed food. He flagged down one of the servants and asked for a few toddler-appropriate snacks and blankets and then went back into the study.

Mobei-jun followed half a step behind the entire time.

"Are you expecting any targeted attack on little Feiyue?" Sha Yuan asked, feeling a little uneasy. The fortress was fairly secure and he wasn't defenseless, but he would rather not fight while holding any baby, let alone this one.

"No," Mobei-jun said.

Sha Yuan did not ask 'then why are you here?' because obviously protecting the child of the Emperor was an important task. He settled for letting Mobei-jun become the wallpaper he was dying to be, with only a few offers of hospitality like 'you can sit if you want' or 'feel free to browse the books' all of which were met with a verbose: "No."

Feiyue was a fairly easy baby and effortlessly charming in how cute she was. Her hair was as dark as Sha Hualing's but it held a soft curl to it, accentuating the adorableness of her features. Sha Yuan spent the afternoon playing with makeshift toys and reading a few age

appropriate books, while she crawled around and took in all the new scenery. She eventually tired herself out from all the excitement and fell asleep in Sha Yuan's arms.

He was sitting and staring at her. Her cheeks were more flushed now and her lips slightly parted open as she breathed deeply in her dreams. "Those cheeks are too much, I want to eat them," Sha Yuan huffed, quietly. "Like two little buns."

There was a cool menacing aura stinging against his neck. Mobei-jun was right up against the chair with a nasty looking weapon out.

Sha Yuan automatically pulled Feiyue a little closer. "It's an *expression*," he said.

Mobei-jun narrowed his eyes and lowered his weapon slightly.

"Suppose it's good you didn't stab me outright," Sha Yuan muttered. He was going to have to smother his cuteness aggression. "Could you be slightly less menacing near the baby?" Sha Yuan asked, after a moment of continued hovering.

Mobei-jun frowned and stepped back half a step.

"Thank you," Sha Yuan said, breathing out and leaning back in his chair. Feiyue shifted slightly in her sleep, her nose crinkling. He swallowed the urge to say something about biting it.

"Not all demons are maternal," Mobei-jun said. Amazing! He *could* do complete sentences.

"Is that a crack at my cousin's parenting skills?" Sha Yuan asked, raising an eyebrow. He hadn't seen her much since the baby was born, but she'd been pretty excited while she was pregnant in a way that hadn't involved 'one-upping' Liu Mingyan or getting more exclusive attention from her husband.

"No," Mobei-jun said, and then gestured to where Sha Yuan was holding Feiyue.

"*Paternal*," Sha Yuan said, testily. Sure, he wasn't as large as his uncle had been, but Sha Yuan wasn't scrawny or delicate enough to be mistaken for a female. He had plenty of muscle. It was lean but it was thicker than Sha Hualing's!

"No," Mobei-jun said, his favorite word, thankfully he elaborated. "Mothers do that."

"Does… the Emperor not hold his baby?" Sha Yuan asked, trying to wrap his head around it. Feiyue was *so cute*. Sure, the Protagonist was probably busy, but too busy to get a cuddle in?

Mobei-jun shrugged. "I meant my mother."

Sha Yuan felt a sudden swell of sympathy for the terrifying ice demon in his study. "I'm not familiar with your clan's… ah traditions, but in my opinion *any* adult relative should try and be nurturing to a child."

Mobei-jun said nothing but his eyes flicked away for a moment.

Sha Hualing came back two days later and agreed with Mobei-jun's 'maternal' assessment, while cackling. Sha Yuan did not rub it in when Feiyue started crying and reaching for him as they were ready to return home. Mostly because he already kind of missed her.

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There was no official 'Royal Babysitter' title, but Sha Yuan thought there should be based on how often Sha Hualing utilized Mobei-jun's services to drop Luo Feiyue off.

Occasionally, Sha Yuan would try to object. "I am literally out of the door leaving."

"Where is Yuan-er going that is more important than his little Feifei?" Sha Hualing said, doing a much less effective job of pathetic sweet baby eyes than the toddler still held out to him.

"The Eastern Fire Isles," Sha Yuan said. There were rumors of a Qilin (or Blackened Feather Deer Unicorn, because Airplane) that was hiding in the deep woods of the islands. He maybe had a month before it moved on or someone stupid tried to hunt it.

His butterfly swords were great, but he couldn't fly on them, so it was going to take him a while to get there and back. He'd only recently (finally) convinced his mother he was strong enough to start taking longer journeys. He was very excited about this!

Sha Hualing lifted her daughter higher and wriggled her in Sha Yuan's direction. It was not effective, but it did make Feiyue laugh and reach out her hands for 'Unc' Yuan!!' which was just… fucking unfair.

"I hate you," Sha Yuan said, taking Feiyue from her.

Sha Hualing laughed, blew him a kiss, and left out of the portal.

Sha Yuan sighed and looked up at Mobei-jun. "Want to play weiqi when she's down for her nap?"

Mobei-jun shrugged. At some point he earned 100 B-Points for making friends with him, but Sha Yuan could still barely get a three word sentence from the ice demon. He was a wicked weiqi player at least.

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On a visit where Sha Yuan had actually been expecting his cousin, he was greeted to a five year old Luo Feiyue slamming full speed into his knees. He was glad for demonic sturdiness because his old body would've cracked in half.

Once Feiyue and Sha Hualing were settled, his cousin ushered Sha Yuan into one of the courtyards that had improved on the view massively since the realms merged. "Your Jiejie needs assistance."

Sha Yuan crossed his arms, trying to look annoyed. He actually didn't mind the idea of an extended stay with his little A-Fei, since that as presumably what she was angling for. Feiyue

was growing into a bright, funny little menace. That didn't mean he was going to let Sha Hualing think it was a given.

Sha Hualing looked around a little and then leaned in close. "Feifei's writing and reading is *terrible*. The human tutors are ignoring her and finding a demon one I can trust is impossible."

Sha Yuan didn't have to pretend to be annoyed now. "They're ignoring her?"

Sha Hualing seemed surprisingly relieved. "Yes! No one believes me and assumes she's scattered, but my daughter is *smart* and the daughter of an Emperor! She shouldn't be made to feel less than her siblings."

"Did you talk to the other wives?" Sha Yuan didn't hear *great* things about the harem, but in Sha Hualing's Sha Hualing way, he knew she liked a few of the wives.

Sha Hualing scowled. "And admit I can't provide for my own child? They'd eat me alive."

"Shouldn't the Emperor be providing for his child?" Sha Yuan wasn't stupid so he never openly spoke ill of the guy, but sometimes when he wasn't thinking of him as the Protagonist he got annoyed on his cousin's behalf.

The face Sha Hualing made was strained. "Husband doesn't… do well discussing education for the children. If I involve him it would make it into a huge mess and then everyone would know Feifei is having difficulties."

Given Luo Binghe's own education history, Sha Yuan could at least sort of understand that. It didn't make him less annoyed.

"Yuan-er," Sha Hualing said, uncharacteristically sincere. "Help her catch up."

"Did you bring any of her study materials?" Sha Yuan asked. He'd never taught someone to read before, but Feiyue was bright and she liked the books he read her. He could probably figure something out.

Sha Hualing smiled brightly and hugged him far too tightly. She might have been smaller than him, but she could definitely snap him in half if she felt like it.

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It took Sha Yuan less than a week to figure out why Feiyue was struggling. It would've taken even less time if the first part of their 'lessons' hadn't involved getting distracted and lured into playing games and running around the fortress. Her tutors should have noticed—they didn't have favorite kind-of-niece weaknesses to deal with distracting them.

"It's called discordant literacy," Sha Yuan said, because apparently dyslexia wasn't one of the many anachronisms of PIDW. "It makes it difficult for her to see the right order of the characters and lines."

Sha Hualing rarely looked this upset. "Is there a cure?"

He debated for a moment getting into disease versus disability and what accommodations were. Then he shrugged. “Sort of. She can work on her cultivation and that might help correct it, but from what I was reading that’s usually only spiritual cultivation.”

“She can learn that,” Sha Hualing said. “She *will* learn that. I don’t care if she’s less human than the other brats.”

“In the meantime,” Sha Yuan said, dodging the anti-human wife rant. “There’s an enchantment you can use for a glass to hold over the pages. It’ll help the lines be a little sharper and easier for her to distinguish. I wrote up what you need for it.”

Sha Hualing took the paper from him and nodded over the instructions.

“Also,” Sha Yuan said, carefully. “It could be genetic… you should probably talk to the other mothers.”

Sha Hualing was visibly displeased with this advice. She ended up taking it, however, because Sha Yuan found himself dragged to the Underground Palace to talk to Liu Mingyan and Ning Yingying (two of his favorite wives, so it wasn’t like he was upset about it) very soon after.

Ning Yingying’s son was too young to determine if he had any issues, but Liu Mingyan’s son (and currently the eldest of Luo Binghe’s children) did. It had gone unnoticed so long, because Luo Wuying preferred spending most of his lessons hitting things with swords rather than reading. Sha Yuan couldn’t help himself and ended up helping Wuying see that there were plenty of books about hitting things with swords that could help him improve and were interesting in their own right.

A few months later and Sha Yuan couldn’t help himself *again* when he realized Liu Mingyan’s phenomenal martial skills weren’t as suited to her son’s style. The Emperor was too busy for private lessons (of course) and Sha Yuan thought that was probably a good thing, considering novel Luo Binghe strong-armed his techniques with so much power he never had to correct all the sabotage his Shizun, scum villain Shen Qingqiu had done.

Sha Hualing had kept Sha Yuan in the Underground Palace far longer than he’d anticipated or felt was smart by introducing him to the biggest goddamn library he’d ever seen. It took a couple of days, but with the help of the squirrelly demon librarian, he found a small section that had recovered tomes and scrolls from the razed Cang Qiong Mountain Sect.

Wuying immediately took to some sword forms from Bai Zhan Peak and Liu Mingyan joined forces with Sha Hualing to guilt Sha Yuan into staying even longer.

He only let Feiyue call him uncle, but was weak-willed when Wuying (and later Ning Yingying’s son Jian) called him, “Shizun.”

They didn’t treat their other teachers with nearly as much respect.

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By the time Luo Binghe had six children in the Underground Palace, Sha Yuan was a fixture more months of the year than he wasn't. He was also incapable of saying no to any of them. Each Protagonist spawn seemed to inherit those pinch-able cheeks and big expressive eyes and would weaponize them easily.

Sha Yuan didn't actively avoid seeking out Luo Binghe. They were definitely in post-canon territory, so there was less risk he'd stumble into the plot in a way that would put him on the revenge list. He still didn't see much of the Emperor and was fairly certain the many times he had seen him, Luo Binghe had barely noticed.

It didn't matter. Sha Yuan still had enough time to go exploring the merged realms between teaching lessons and had made pretty good friends with some of the wives. He felt fairly content with his second life.

One morning on his way back to the Underground Palace, bag full of the latest items he'd scrounged up while avoiding getting eaten, and the System that Sha Yuan hadn't heard from in years, pinged into his vision.

[Congratulations! Protagonist quest completion has upgraded Host's status from NPC to ICA (Important Character Arc!) — Please standby for more information!]

What the hell does that mean? Sha Yuan said to it, but it was apparently still 'on standby'.

He was still mulling this over hours later as he watched the children run around the gardens 'training' their techniques. Sha Hualing, Liu Mingyan, and Ning Yingying were nearby having tea and discussing something that sounded vaguely interesting so he tried to shake off his confusion about the System notification.

"A-Luo said it wasn't a qi deviation," Ning Yingying said, firmly but still with a sweet softness.

"He hasn't had one since he conquered Xin Mo," Liu Mingyan agreed.

Sha Hualing scoffed. "How else do you explain his strange behavior? He was *crying*."

"It's fine to cry," Ning Yingying said, agreeably.

Liu Mingyan's face was covered in her customary veil but her eyes tightened and Sha Yuan suspected she was frowning. "He *was* asking odd things."

"Exactly," Sha Hualing said, preening at being agreed with. "It was like a completely different husband. He was *repulsed* when Qin Wanyue offered to dual cultivate with him." She sounded a bit too pleased about that last bit.

"He had objections to anyone offering," Ning Yingying pointed out, but she did frown too. Then she noticed Sha Yuan's blatant eavesdropping. "Ah, A-Yuan wasn't here for it were you?"

Sha Yuan shook his head. "I've been in the Western Frost-Hills for the last two months."

The three wives looked at each other. Sha Hualing opened her mouth to speak and Liu Mingyan kicked her. Knowing his cousin and the kinds of things she said, that was probably for the best.

“Our husband recently had a couple of days… where he was very confused,” Liu Mingyan said, ignoring Sha Hualing’s whining as she rubbed her shin.

“He kept asking for our Shizun,” Ning Yingying said, staring into her teacup.

“And now he’s been fucking men,” Sha Hualing added, killing any sort of morose tension.

Sha Yuan choked, coughing into his hand.

“Openly,” Liu Mingyan corrected. “We don’t know that he wasn’t before.”

“A man in the harem could make things a little more interesting,” Sha Hualing agreed. “Better than yet another village girl too stupid to make her way out of a clear trap.”

“Ahhh, A-Yuan’s face is red,” Ning Yingying said, cheerful again. “Even his ears.”

“I’m going to go teach your children,” Sha Yuan said, flustered and trying to ignore their laughter as he dragged himself to his feet.

Maybe Airplane was posting bonus chapters after Sha Yuan died to appeal to BL fans.

Sha Yuan let the children chase him, which was a potent distraction from any and all thoughts involving that conversation since it required a lot of concentration to avoid little Luos tripping him—and to properly make a good imitation of whatever monster they’d decided he’d be today.

The System finally loaded, though it wasn’t much more information.

[Quest: ‘A Shizun for Everyone!’ has started.]

What the hell does that *mean?* Wasn’t he already teaching all of the kids? It wasn’t like he was going to refuse to include any new ones.

[No details currently available. This quest is designated for the Protagonist!]

That was unsurprisingly no help and not even slightly less confusing. Maybe Luo Binghe needed a friend to talk to about his… uh new interests? Why Sha Yuan would be that person he had no idea.

He then remembered realizing at twenty that the body he’d transmigrated to was not exactly straight given the time spent with a distractingly handsome snake demon. He wasn’t sure if that was common knowledge or not, but Sha Hualing definitely knew given her half a year of snake charmer jokes.

Okay. Fine. If he had to be the ear to bend for the Protagonist bending, then he’d figure it out.

What the hell that had to do with being a ‘Shizun’ Sha Yuan had no idea.

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“Shizun!” Ning Yingying’s son said cheerfully, holding up a very wet piece of parchment. Painted on it was a decent rendition of the morning skyline from this part of the palace.

“*Jian*,” Sha Yuan tried to scold, but Jian’s enthusiasm was too infectious so he could only manage to smother his laugh. He pushed the paper down so it was lying flat. “You need to let it dry first. You’ll ruin your hard work.”

“Good hard work?” Jian asked, blatantly fishing for a compliment.

Sha Yuan huffed a laugh and ruffled the fluffy hair on his head. “Yes, yes. Jian-er is very talented, but I’ll be better judge of that if you don’t let it drip down the paper.”

“Father!” Jian said, excitedly running full speed, while Sha Yuan tried to save him from stepping all over the paper in his haste.

It took a moment, filled with muttering on Sha Yuan’s part before he realized that the *Emperor* was standing a few feet from him, while his youngest son excitedly greeted him. Not a big deal, since usually Sha Yuan would be treated like set dressing, especially when a more notable person was around. This time Luo Binghe wasn’t glancing past Sha Yuan with disinterest. This time the Emperor was glaring at him.

Luo Binghe bent down to hoist Jian up into the air with a gleeful squeal and then settle him at his side, but he kept *glowering* at Sha Yuan the entire time. “Who is this?”

“Shizun!” Jian said, not at all helpfully considering the eye twitch that his father delivered with that pronouncement.

“Sha Yuan, Junshang,” Sha Yuan said, bowing as deeply as he could manage. “One of your children’s teachers.”

Cousin to your third wife. Who you’ve met like ten times. He didn’t care that he went unnoticed, but why was he getting glared at the one time he was?

“You’re a demon,” Luo Binghe said, flatly.

“Yes,” Sha Yuan said, still bowed, but unable to resist shooting a confused look in the Emperor’s direction. Considering all of his children were part demon too and he’d merged the realms for unity it was a rather odd objection.

Luo Binghe released a loud, irritated sounding breath through his nose and gestured for Sha Yuan to rise again. “What are you teaching them?”

“Would the Emperor like a copy of the lesson plans?” Sha Yuan asked, warily. He wanted to go back to when Luo Binghe ignored him, because the malevolent pointed glare was very not fun.

“Shizun teaches us calligraphy, books, art, running, and jumping!” Jian said, enthusiastically and inaccurately.

“Running and jumping?” Luo Binghe said skeptically, finally looking at his son.

Jian nodded, his smile was as wide as his mother’s. “He lets us chase him to uh…” Jian looked over his shoulder at Sha Yuan. “Capture monsters?”

Sha Yuan tried to focus on the smaller Luo, whose gaze was a lot less intense. “Is that a request?”

Jian nodded, eyes bright and painfully effective even without the intensity.

“Very well,” Sha Yuan said, sounding put upon. “Make sure you pick a monster with less than seven legs this time.”

Jian, pleased with himself, turned back towards his father. “Do you want to capture monsters with us, Father?”

Oh perfect, yes that was exactly what Sha Yuan needed. To be *hunted* by Luo Binghe. The terror might outweigh the embarrassment at pretending to be a Club-Footed Giraffe Lemur.

“Some other time,” Luo Binghe said, reasonably soft for talking to a child at least. This might’ve been the first time Sha Yuan had seen him interact with one of them. “Go see your mother.”

Jian pouted, but didn’t argue as he was set down. He dragged his feet a little and looked back at them before he headed off. At least he managed to avoid stepping on his art piece. Sha Yuan went to go pick it up and find a safer spot for it when a vice clamped down on his arm. He glanced over his shoulder and the scary Emperor eyes were back on him.

“The running and jumping aren’t actually lessons,” Sha Yuan said, trying to remember protocol in a situation like this. Was there protocol? “If that is what y—Junshang is concerned with.”

“What are they then?” Luo Binghe asked, his grip not lessening even after Sha Yuan turned around to face him.

“Playing?” Sha Yuan tried moving his arm away and thankfully the Protagonist let go. He resisted the urge to rub where the Emperor had probably left bruises, glad his more modest teaching outfit had sleeves.

“Playing?” Luo Binghe repeated.

“Yes,” Sha Yuan said. What the *fuck* was he supposed to say to get this conversation to end? “They’re children.”

There was something in one of the books he’d gotten when he started to take the whole tutor thing seriously about how playing was important to childhood development, but he didn’t

really think the Emperor gave a shit at the moment. He didn't know what the Emperor thought at the moment beyond being unreasonably cranky.

"Why doesn't Sha Yuan show me the—" Luo Binghe cut himself off and blinked. "You're Hualing's cousin."

Sha Yuan barely resisted the urge to roll his eyes. "Yes." He felt like the opposite of Mobei-jun at the moment. "If you'd like to see the lesson plans I can gather them, but it may take me the afternoon."

"Why?" Luo Binghe looked confused but maybe slightly less aggressive about it.

"They're specialized to each of the students," Sha Yuan said. He could've said, 'children' but he had been asked to let some of the servants sit in on supplementary literacy lessons and not all of them were children. "I have to sort them."

He also had an appointment to be chased around one of the larger gardens after lunch.

"Fine," Luo Binghe said, clipped. "Bring them this evening."

Before Sha Yuan could ask *where*, the Emperor of the Three Realms turned gracefully around and stomped off.

"The fuck was that?" Sha Yuan said under his breath. For some reason the System gave him 50 B-Points.

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For *obvious* reasons, Sha Yuan had not been to any of the private chambers of the Emperor. He'd occasionally been in the harem housing, mostly due to tea invites (and a book club Mingyan started), but none of the areas associated with the Emperor. He'd assumed he'd go to the audience chamber, a place he'd been a few times usually in a crowd of other Sha Clan.

Instead, Sha Yuan was directed to what appeared to be the Emperor's 'office' — or whatever equivalent there was. It was big enough to be its own apartment in Shanghai. Sha Yuan had to resist eyeballing the bookshelves too much as he bowed again and waited an unbearable amount of time while holding this many papers to be allowed to rise.

Then he stood there, while Luo Binghe flipped through the progress reports and lesson plans he'd made for his children. He wasn't exactly gentle with them and Sha Yuan twitched each time he almost ripped a page.

It wasn't like there was a fucking copy machine.

"You're teaching Wuying cultivation, why?" Luo Binghe finally said.

"It's supplementary," Sha Yuan said, this question at least didn't feel pointed. "His mother is handling the majority." Obviously. "He also has a specialized tutor."

Luo Binghe frowned, gesturing to the paper. "It doesn't specify spiritual or demonic."

“Wuying hasn’t shown propensity for demonic cultivation,” Sha Yuan said. “At least from what I’ve seen, I’m sure Junshang would be the expert in that regard.”

The glare was back. Sha Yuan replayed what he’d just said in his head and was mostly certain it hadn’t been snarky. Of course Luo Binghe could teach his own son about demonic cultivation if needed.

“So you’re teaching him supplemental *spiritual* cultivation?”

Sha Yuan felt a very severe prickling sensation on the back of his neck. He dug his claws into his thigh to keep from letting the (mostly) dormant internet ranting Peerless Cucumber spirit rise in him. “As it relates to his other lessons. Yes.”

“You’re a demon.”

Oh for fuck’s sake. “Yes, we’ve established,” Sha Yuan said, shortly.

Luo Binghe’s eyebrows rose, but he didn’t stab him with Xin Mo. “How are you teaching something you can’t do?”

“Isn't that the expression?” Sha Yuan said, before he caught himself. He shook his head. “I read. A lot. I understand the concept well enough to apply it to what Wuying is doing. I can see how that might be a concern if it was the *only* training he was receiving, but it’s rather insignificant compared to how much he’s been learning from his mother.” Sha Yuan belatedly remembered to also add, “And his specialized instruction.”

“You don’t like his instructor,” Luo Binghe said. He wasn’t… glaring anymore at least, but Sha Yuan could not read that expression on his face other than it probably wouldn't lead to him ordering Sha Yuan’s execution.

“He’s qualified,” Sha Yuan said. It wasn’t a lie. It also wasn’t a disagreement. “It’s not this one’s place to pass judgement on the other tutors.”

Luo Binghe leaned back in his seat, idly flipping his thumb against the pages he was still holding. “You *really* don’t like him.”

Sha Yuan tried, but he was not an expert at holding his tongue. He’d transmigrated into Sha Hualing’s family for fuck’s sake. Etiquette training wasn’t exactly included. If anything he was aware he might be *worse* now than before he’d transmigrated.

“The man’s an idiot,” Sha Yuan said, shortly. “Wuying is intelligent, but he isn’t motivated by meditating for meditation’s sake. He doesn’t *explain* the reasons Wuying needs to learn anything so why would Wuying actually care to learn it? Not to mention, he won’t show A-Fei any basic cultivation techniques because she’s more demon than her siblings. It might also be because she’s a girl. He seems to ignore Xiu-er, which is irresponsible, because her mother doesn’t know how to cultivate so she’s not receiving any specialized instruction. Who cares if she’s a girl? Your first and second wives are *outstanding* cultivators. That should be proof enough to pull his head out of his—”

Sha Yuan's brain finally caught up with his mouth. He clamped it shut and cleared his throat, bowing. "A… apologies. This one shouldn't speak ill of his fellow instructors."

There was an unreadable look on Luo Binghe's face. "I asked for your opinion."

He hadn't, but that was charitable of him to pretend. Sha Yuan cleared his throat and tried to remove the death grip his clawed hand had on his leg before he ripped his pants. "Wuying likes sword forms," he said. "I add a little meditation to the mix to help him improve them and it helps him with the other lessons that it applies to."

"Mingyan doesn't do this?" Luo Binghe asked, raising an eyebrow. There was a glint of amusement in his eyes.

"Mingyan is his mother and he's almost a teenager," Sha Yuan said, forgetting he probably shouldn't be so casual with Luo Binghe's wife's name. "It's impressive she gets him to listen to as much as she does."

"You are not at all like your cousin, are you?" Luo Binghe said out of nowhere.

Sha Yuan wasn't sure how to take that. It was probably an insult to him, since Luo Binghe was *married* to Sha Hualing, but it wasn't untrue. He fought a smile at the idea of Sha Hualing having the patience to teach calligraphy.

"I am sure she would agree with you," he said, diplomatically.

Luo Binghe nodded and stared down at the papers. "I'll have these returned to you tomorrow. You can go."

Sha Yuan bowed, probably less low than he should have and forced himself not to dart out the door once he'd gotten to it.

***

The children's new spiritual cultivation instructor was *far* better than the previous one. It soothed a lot of the guilt Sha Yuan felt about probably getting the old one fired. The new one was a wandering cultivator that had worked with both demon hybrids and humans. They also did extra work with the children if they were struggling.

It was a relief, mostly because Sha Yuan was getting stir crazy and he didn't have to feel guilty taking a few weeks for himself.

The mountains that had previously housed a small area of forested land had changed after the realms merged into a rictus valley with land formations that were physically impossible otherwise. It was humid as hell, but beautiful. It was also the only place where someone might find Yellow Tipped Venom Blossoms.

Sha Yuan had developed a slight addiction to collecting poisonous plants that weren't aphrodisiacs over the years. Initially only to ensure that he had some kind of antidote that didn't involve a 'fuck or die' situation. The poison plants ended up being the coolest ones though, so he liked finding the rarer ones and recording what he could from them.

That was how he'd been so stupidly distracted, trying to sketch the intricate unnatural curve of the stained yellow petals, that he hadn't noticed the low level villains who came up behind him and knocked him out.

Sha Yuan woke up bound in a cave with a killer headache.

[Mini-Quest: 'Mistaken Identity' started.]

Mistaken for who? Sha Yuan thought at it, squinting to get a view of the cave he was in. There was water or some sort of liquid dripping consistently in the background and the barest hint of outside was leaking in enough light that was pretty sure he was still somewhere in the valley.

[Host has been identified by group villains as Sha Hualing.]

I'm a man. Sha Yuan glared into the air.

[Would host like to activate scenario pusher for 100 B-Points?]

Sha Yuan ignored it, as idiot villain number one arrived. It was a demon with a pig snout and tusks, but otherwise human looking. Broad and big, but if Sha Yuan had been *untied* wouldn't have been hard to take down.

"Ah, the Sha consort is up!" Pig-Tusk said, cheerfully.

"Are you nearsighted?" Sha Yuan would have gestured to his chest if his hands weren't bound, as it was he could only gesture with his chin. "I'm *not* the Sha consort."

Pig-Tusk squinted at him, which maybe the needing glasses thing wasn't off track. "Peng," he called back. "This is Sha Hualing, right? The Emperor's third wife?"

"Of course," responded (Sha Yuan assumed) Peng. The owner of the voice stepped into the cave and Sha Yuan had to swallow a hysterical urge to laugh when he noticed it was a human. Demon and human unity, just like the Emperor wanted.

"I'm really not," Sha Yuan said. The ropes were cutting off his demonic cultivation which was very annoying, but he was able to at least turn his hand up and start sawing at them with one of his claws. He was also sawing a little bit at his palms, but it felt apt to punish himself for being stupid enough to get caught up in this.

It was post-canon. He was the random NPC. *Why* was he fielding his cousin's wife plots?

[Reminder, host was recently upgraded to ICA!]

What the hell does Important Character Arc have to do with getting kidnapped?

[Would host like to use scenario pusher for 100 B-Points?] The System asked again.

Sha Yuan had a few words to snap at it when the next part of the mishmash low IQ crew came into the dripping cave. A tiger demon of substantial size that had a very intent stare at

Sha Yuan's neck.

"That's a pretty Sha Clan demon," Scary Tiger Demon (STD) rumbled, stepping closer. "If it's not the Hualing, it's still worth something."

Sha Yuan did not know what that meant and did not want to find out.

Yes. Whatever the fuck that is. Activate.

[Scenario pusher activated, please enjoy!]

STD put a clawed hand on Sha Yuan's top and pulled Sha Yuan towards him for presumably better examination, but when Sha Yuan (understandably!) lurched backwards, it just ripped the fabric leaving him still more dressed than most of his transmigration family. Which wasn't saying much.

What the FUCK. Was THAT the scenario pusher?

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His face was unbearably hot. "See. Not Sha Hualing."

"Her tits were supposed to be small?" Peng said uncertainly, staring way too closely at Sha Yuan's lack of them.

"Okay, that is still my cousin, asshole," Sha Yuan snapped. "Also the Emperor's consort. What the hell was your plan anyway? Creative suicide?"

"Ransom," Pig-Tusk said. He also seemed to be trying to decide if Sha Yuan's completely normal (and he thought pretty built!) chest was possibly tits.

"Phenomenal work," Sha Yuan said, irritation coursing through him as he kept trying to claw through the stupid ropes. "If you had kidnapped her, you'd get a painful death. So either way, no payday."

Pig-Tusk and STD looked at each other warily. Please get braincells. He wanted to get back to drawing flowers and oh… if these assholes lost his notebook he was going to be so pissed.

Peng was a little too close and leaned in. His breath was rancid. "Your cousin might pay something for you."

"I doubt it," Sha Yuan said, grimacing. If she was bored she might rescue him and lord it over him. Maybe he'd get lucky and she'd tell Mobei-jun or one of the wives who liked him. More likely she'd laugh and assume that he'd figure it out himself. Which he really needed to, because this was the *stupidest* way to die.

"Someone'll pay for you," Peng said, leaning in even closer. It was not his rancid breath that made Sha Yuan grimace this time. He got even closer, taking a long sniff of Sha Yuan's hair like a creep but also an idiot. It put his neck in range and Sha Yuan sank his teeth into it and

closed his jaw with as much strength as he could before wrenching backwards—the movement helping him free his hands a little.

He did not have particularly sharp teeth, but he still managed to get something fleshy and bloody that he had to spit out. Demon cuisine had been an adjustment but raw human was not his fancy.

Peng was screaming and death gurgling, which was a nice distraction for Sha Yuan to get his hands fully free. His palm and wrist were bleeding pretty badly and that seemed to help him finish slipping out of the binding. He pushed himself backwards and went for the rope on his legs, but Peng's screaming was also distracting to him so he didn't notice when STD slammed him into the wall with much larger hands.

STD's hand/paw was the size of Sha Yuan's entire throat and it pressed down, squeezing the air out of him, while the Tiger Demon's claws sank into the skin.

Pain. He'd been a shut-in demon noble and then a fairly well-off royal tutor and forgot how much this sucked. A knee came up and knocked into his abdomen, pushing what little air he had left out of him. Black spots came over his eyes as he tried to dig his pathetically small in comparison claws into the Tiger Demon's arms.

Then everything went red. And wet. And Sha Yuan could breathe again. He hit the cave floor hard on his knees, coughing as his vision slowly came back to him. He realized he had Tiger Demon blood all over his face. He wiped his eyes and wished he wasn't so lightheaded so he could enjoy the view of Xin Mo bisecting Pig-Tusk.

Well, at least if he was stealing Sha Hualing's wife plot he also got the save. Sha Yuan curled over and coughed again.

"You're not Hualing," Luo Binghe said, while Sha Yuan grabbed STD's dead paw and used it to slash the rope binding his legs.

"No shit, that's what I told them," Sha Yuan said, voice brittle from his injuries. He wiped his face. "Also thank you," he added, once his legs were free. He did a horrendous job using them to stand up and Luo Binghe grabbed his elbow like he was some swooning maiden to help him stand.

He was never going to live this down.

On the upside, with the arterial blood still covering his face, it was probably hard to tell he was flushed. Sha Yuan cleared his throat and took a step back, nodding as he tried to figure out where those assholes put his stuff. He also realized he was wearing nothing but a pair of ripped pants and crossed his arms over his bare chest.

"Sha Yuan?" Luo Binghe said, sounding confused. "Why are you here?"

What the fuck kind of — "I was *kidnapped*?" Sha Yuan said, darting a glance back at perfectly dressed and blood free Luo Binghe. "Because these idiots didn't know what Sha Hualing looks like."

“You were kidnapped from the palace?” Luo Binghe was glaring again. Maybe it was his default face.

Sha Yuan breathed out in relief when he saw his notebook and butterfly knives. “No. I was in the valley. I wasn’t expecting a wi—” He cleared his throat and clipped his swords on his sides since his back was currently bare. “A kidnapping.”

“Why were you in the valley?” Luo Binghe asked, frustrated.

If Sha Yuan weren’t completely *done* with today, he might have felt some empathy. He was sure the Emperor had things to do and didn’t appreciate having his romantic kidnapping blood-filled *papapa* session ruined. As it was, he rubbed the blood off his palm since the wound had thankfully started to close up and picked up his notebook.

“I was tracking down a plant,” Sha Yuan said, opening the page to where he’d almost finished his sketch. He held it up for a brief moment and then closed it when he saw the dismissive sneer on the Emperor’s face.

He hadn’t *finished* the sketch yet.

“Damnit,” Sha Yuan muttered, looking around. His qiankun pouch wasn’t here so it was probably still next to the Yellow Tipped Venom Blossoms. Along with his tent, supplies, and extra clothes.

He’d need to figure out where he was and trek back down to it. Bloody and half naked. Good thing there weren’t any substantial predators in this area. Although if there had been, he might’ve been more on guard and not so fucking stupid to get caught by canon fodder.

Sha Yuan realized Luo Binghe was still in the cave. Staring at him.

“Uh. Thank you, again,” he said.

“That’s a Yellow Tipped Venom Blossom,” Luo Binghe said gesturing to his notebook.

“Yes,” Sha Yuan said. He really was on a roll with the one word answers in these conversations. Mobei-jun would be proud.

“Why were you looking at poisonous plants by yourself?”

Sha Yuan snorted, wincing at how that hurt his throat. “It’d be a weird group activity.” He rubbed his sore and stinging throat and gave in to the urge to kick the corpse of the Tiger Demon a little. “I like poisonous plants.”

“Why?”

Sha Yuan still had his hand over his neck. He stared at Luo Binghe. “They’re interesting?”

There was silence, beyond the dripping of that wet something in the cave as they stared at each other.

Finally, Luo Binghe let out an annoyed sigh and lifted his sword up, creating a portal. “Come, I’ll drop you at the palace.”

“Appreciated,” Sha Yuan said, quickly, because he had just saved his life. “But I’m not headed back yet.”

The black and purple demonic portal flickered and then went out, while Luo Binghe stared at him blankly.

“You teach my children,” he said.

Sha Yuan nodded, mostly to avoid a one-word answer again. “An additional reason I probably shouldn’t head back right now looking like this.”

“They’ve seen Sha Hualing in less,” Luo Binghe said, unimpressed.

It was Sha Yuan’s turn to stare. He was once again glad the drying disgusting blood was camouflaging any redness. “Yes, well. That is… that is not how *I* dress and that isn’t what I meant,” he cleared his throat, wincing again. Fuck. He was pretty sure he had healing salve in his bag, but if not there were probably some kind of plants nearby that would help. Mostly he wanted to dunk his entire body in a cold stream.

“Are you abandoning your position?” Luo Binghe asked, narrowing his eyes.

“What?” Sha Yuan dropped his hand from his neck to put on his hip. “No. I’m… I don’t live at the Underground Palace all year.”

Okay now the Emperor looked confused.

“Do you not… the royal tutors cycle, Junshang,” Sha Yuan said. “And even if they didn’t, I’d take vacations.”

“This… is a vacation?” Luo Binghe still looked confused.

Sha Yuan looked around. “I mean, not *this*, but the whole looking at a cool part of the world to find something interesting is usually what I do, yeah.”

“Hm,” Luo Binghe said.

Did Sha Yuan need to be dismissed from a near death scenario in a cave? That couldn’t possibly be the standard. He tried making his way closer to the mouth of the cave. Luo Binghe caught his arm, the grip wasn’t a vice at least.

“You’re injured,” the Emperor said, when apparently Sha Yuan’s glance back at him expressed as much ‘wtf’ as he was feeling.

“I’m fine,” Sha Yuan said. The Emperor was probably confused that there wasn’t any actual swooning. Maybe it made the wife plot feel incomplete. Sha Yuan couldn’t really do much about that and the sooner he left, the sooner Luo Binghe could find another set of circumstances to lead to a convenient overwritten sex scene.

“Thank you,” Sha Yuan added, gently trying to pull his arm out of the Emperor’s grip. “Again.”

The fingers on his arm tightened and that uncomfortably intense stare was back. It was worse than when Mobei-jun was lurking. A sharp tingling went up and down Sha Yuan’s spine.

What the fuck did he want?

“I can get back down the valley myself,” Sha Yuan said, trying and failing to pull his arm away again. “One of the dead ones was me,” he gestured with his head and immediately regretted how that motion pulled at the wounds on the side of his neck. He managed to forgo the wince, because he was pretty sure he already looked incredibly inept.

Luo Binghe did not take his hand off Sha Yuan’s arm. He did sheath Xin Mo. “I’ll take you.”

“I don’t ne—” Sha Yuan was incapable of finishing his objection, because the Emperor was already dragging him out of the cave. “Do you even know where to go?”

Luo Binghe stopped, but only to let Sha Yuan go ahead of him. He gestured with his head, gallantly, still with his hand on Sha Yuan’s arm like he was going to make a break for it.

[Mini-Quest ‘Mistaken Identity’ ended! Congratulations! 25 B-Points have been awarded and progress has been made on ‘A Shizun for Everyone!’]

Sha Yuan gripped the notebook in his hand and tried to keep his baffled frustration off his face.

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An awkward few hours later, and Sha Yuan found his stuff. He had very little privacy while trying to wash the blood off of himself and then even less privacy when the wounds on his neck were obvious and the Emperor started peevishly poking at them before Sha Yuan thought better of it and swatted his hands away.

Thankfully, Luo Binghe seemed the same level of aggravated he’d been so far and only continued glowering importantly. Sha Yuan applied healing salve to his neck and the wound on his wrist and palm—which was embarrassingly less deep. Tiger Demon claws would’ve been so much cooler. He basically only had super sharp fingernails. They weren’t even retractable.

“Could you—maybe turn around?” Sha Yuan asked, finally, when he had a spare change of clothes out.

“You are very much not like your cousin,” Luo Binghe said, but did as he asked.

Sha Yuan sighed and awkwardly changed into his spare clothing, tossing aside his ruined pants. He cleared his throat. “I’m good now. Also completely aware that I am the Sha Clan prude and fine with that, thank you.”

The Emperor snorted before he turned back around. Oh, he did have a sense of humor. Amazing.

“Maybe if I wasn’t, they wouldn’t have mistaken me for a woman,” Sha Yuan mostly muttered to himself.

“You’re more delicate than most male demons of your clan,” Luo Binghe said, like that was helpful.

Sha Yuan missed the camouflage blood. He settled for pretending to flip through his notebook to hide the flush on his face. “I didn’t know you’d noticed any besides my uncle.”

“I’d have noticed you,” Luo Binghe said. He probably thought that sounded suave.

It might have if he hadn’t met Sha Yuan multiple times over the last decade. Sha Yuan snorted. “Yeah, okay,” he said, actually flipping to the right page and digging in his pouch for his charcoal.

“You don’t believe me?” Luo Binghe looked more curious than annoyed.

Sha Yuan glanced up at him, doing a bad job at hiding his own amusement. “I’ve been practically living in the palace for years now and we’ve met on multiple official occasions.”

Now the Emperor looked annoyed. At least it was familiar at this point. “That’s different.”

“Mm,” Sha Yuan said, crouching down by the Yellow Tipped Venom Blossoms, and resting his notebook on his upturned knees as a table. “Its not like it’s surprising,” he said, trying to remember where he’d left off before those dumb shits had ambushed him.

“No?”

It had been a fairly rough day and the suns were beginning to set so Sha Yuan was very focused on trying to finish his sketch before he lost all the light. Which was why he didn’t have even a remote hint of a brain cell to devote to a mouth filter.

“I’d be surprised if you could name all your wives,” he said, then heard himself and the charcoal on the page smeared. “Fuck,” he glanced up. “Sorry. That was—I didn't mean that.”

“I think you did,” Luo Binghe said, darkly. He *already* towered over Sha Yuan when he was standing. It was not less ominous when he did it while Sha Yuan was crouched on the ground.

“I have a head injury,” Sha Yuan said, weakly. He took back his early thoughts. *This* actually would be the stupidest way to die.

The Emperor did not rip his head off his shoulders, but he did grab the notebook out of Sha Yuan’s hand which for some reason felt worse. Thankfully he didn’t toss it into the river, but instead started flipping through it, with an angry look on his face. “Do you talk to my children like this?”

“Of course not!” Sha Yuan said, resisting the urge to stand up and grab his notebook back. “I was—it was stupid. I’m irritated and sore and feeling like an idiot for getting caught *by* a pack of idiots. I’m sure you care deeply for … all your wives.”

Why the *hell* had he paused?

Luo Binghe raised his eyebrow, glancing down at Sha Yuan before going back to his angry flipping of pages.

“*I* don’t know all of them,” Sha Yuan said. “I was probably projecting. That’s… honestly that’s more people than I know in general from my entire life. It says a lot about Junshang’s um… generosity of spirit?”

He hoped Sha Hualing would mourn him.

Luo Binghe threw his notebook back at him and looked unimpressed as Sha Yuan scrambled to catch it and fell over from his crouch onto his ass in the dirt. “You research beasts too?”

“Uh, yeah,” Sha Yuan said, trying to turn his idiotic fall into an intentional looking cross legged meditation pose.

“There’s no common theme,” Luo Binghe said, staring down at him. Sha Yuan suddenly felt like a bug specimen that was seconds away from having its winged pinned.

“There is,” Sha Yuan said, lightly. He’d been working on it for a while. Some of them were already in their own reference material, but not necessarily in their current state. “It’s creatures and plants that either thrived or appeared after you merged the realms.”

There was less murderous intent on Luo Binghe’s face, but that pinned bug feeling didn’t lessen. “New ones?”

“Yeah,” Sha Yuan said, he opened his notebook and flipped to a marked page. “All the ones with the triangle are new,” he said pointing to the corner. “Or probably new. I might’ve missed them in some obscure book, but I didn’t really have much to do but read as a kid so I doubt it.”

Luo Binghe sat down on the ground. Far more gracefully than Sha Yuan had managed to fall of course. He held his hand out for the book again and Sha Yuan silently handed it over.

Sha Yuan watched as he flipped to the pages with triangles and studied them, reading over Sha Yuan’s stupid tiny notes and badly illustrated renditions.

“You’re why Feiyue likes books so much,” the Emperor said, still staring at one of the pages.

Sha Yuan couldn’t help the way his lips twitched. The fondness for his darling little cousin was a nice way to alleviate the looming fear of death. He wondered if she demanded unlimited bedtime stories from her father too. He wondered (and hoped) Luo Binghe had enough time to give into those demands.

“Probably,” Sha Yuan said. She’d really taken to reading once she’d gotten some help with it. It was the only time she wasn’t talking non-stop, but Sha Yuan didn’t mind that much either.

Luo Binghe looked up, staring a little too intently again. “How many times have I met you?”

Sha Yuan wondered if he should lie. “A few,” he tried. Then at Luo Binghe’s narrowed eyes, said, “at least ten.”

There was mild disbelief on the Protagonist’s face, but it shifted a little as his mouth twisted and he seemed to accept the truth of that.

“This is my first time getting kidnapped,” Sha Yuan offered. It wasn’t like he *blamed* him for not remembering the wallflower Sha cousin. Being introduced each time next to Sha Hualing was obviously not going to make Sha Yuan very memorable.

“That is actually surprising,” Luo Binghe said.

“I did kill one of them,” Sha Yuan reminded him, huffing. “I just… there aren’t any predators native to this area so I wasn’t expecting random — jerks.”

Luo Binghe looked amused now. Oh, fuck him.

Sha Yuan had nothing to cover his face with and ignored the way the Emperor glanced at his ears which were feeling hot. “Is there anything I can offer you to not tell Ling-jie about this?”

“No,” Luo Binghe said, pleased with himself as he handed back Sha Yuan’s notebook.

The light had already dropped too much to get a good enough view to finish his sketch, but he flipped back to the page anyway so he wouldn’t have to look at the Emperor’s stupid smug face. “How did they contact you anyway?”

“I was in the area,” Luo Binghe said.

“For what?” Sha Yuan asked, curious enough to glance back at him again.

“Reports of a Magma Breath Tortoise in the area,” Luo Binghe said.

“Seriously?” Sha Yuan almost dropped his notebook. “Did you see it?”

There was an inscrutable look on Luo Binghe’s face that smothered the smugness. “I was delayed.”

“Well they’re nocturnal from all accounts,” Sha Yuan said, “so maybe my stupid kidnapping helped.”

“Maybe.” The smile now was less smug, but still uncomfortable to look at directly. “Did you want to see it?”

“Yes,” Sha Yuan said, immediately, and then cleared his throat and looked away from the pure amusement making Luo Binghe’s stupid eyes shine. “I mean, if I wouldn’t get in your

way.”

The Emperor of the Three Realms stood elegantly on his feet and held a hand out for the moron who had been kidnapped and insulted his ability to remember his own wives. Sha Yuan shoved his notebook into his qiankun pouch before reaching out to take it and letting himself be pulled up easily.

He definitely did not consider himself *delicate*, but somehow even though Luo Binghe was not as tall as Mobei-jun, Sha Yuan felt a little more fragile next to him.

Chapter End Notes

Bing-ge: back from svsss universe so i guess i’ll see if banging dudes fixes my severe emotional problems
Bing-ge: nope, I should probably go yell at my kids’ favorite teacher and torment him just cos one of them called him ‘shizun’

Chapter 2: Part 2

Chapter Summary

Luo Binghe learns how to make a friend.

Chapter Notes

~8.2k

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sha Yuan had not expected Luo Binghe to continue to want to hang around after the Magma Breath Tortoises were taken care of (thankfully without killing them—Sha Yuan was happy to point out a way to relocate them to a nearby inactive volcano).

The Emperor must've been bored, because he decided to tag along for Sha Yuan's next area of exploration. It was less overbearing and nerve-racking than Sha Yuan thought it might be. Probably the fact that he hadn't been murdered yet from the lack of filter on his stupid mouth helped.

They were waylaid before they made it to the hanging moss caves (which were supposed to hold bioluminescent amber damselflies) by another very clear wife plot. A nearby village had been attacked by mysterious dark cultivators that sounded very much like an occult movie ripoff that Sha Yuan couldn't remember exactly. The ominous mystery involved saving the heaving chested damsel daughter of the town's elder.

Sha Yuan browsed some of the local market stands, while Luo Binghe dealt with the end of that wife plot. Sha Yuan tried not to be disappointed, but presumably having sex with a rescued damsel and then marrying her was going to take priority from looking at bugs in a moss filled cave. They at least had some interesting items in the market. Sha Yuan bought a couple of sweet steamed buns. Then a third mantou, in case wife number #297 wanted one (and if she didn't based on how good it was, Sha Yuan had no problem eating it).

He also found the ugliest little tortoise figurine carved out of obsidian with black oval eyes and bought it since he had nothing better to do and the shopkeep was nice.

By the time he'd looked at everything, Luo Binghe was still in the spot he'd left him. He was standing alone, with a thoughtful frown on his face.

Sha Yuan offered him a mantou, glancing around for his fiancée. He didn't want to be rude before he ate hers. He was still holding his up to Luo Binghe who was staring at it like it was a bomb.

"Ah, you don't have to?" Sha Yuan started pulling it back and then Luo Binghe snatched it out of his hand.

Even after reading all of PIDW, he was never going to understand this guy.

"Where's—" Sha Yuan trailed off. He hadn't learned her name which was ironic, but *he'd* never admitted to knowing all of Luo Binghe's wives' names even if he… probably did.

Luo Binghe had a raised eyebrow as he took a fanged bite out of his steamed bun. There was a little sugar on his upper lip that he licked off before swallowing. "We should get a room at the inn," Luo Binghe said, "so we have somewhere to come back to after the cave."

Sha Yuan stopped staring at his mouth and looked down at the extra bun. Okay, no wife #297 yet. That was fine. Maybe they'd reconnect in the morning. He tore off a piece of her steamed bun and nodded while he chewed.

Luo Binghe's inscrutable face was back again. Sha Yuan wasn't sure if it was worse than his angry one or not. "You like human food."

"Most demons probably would if they tried it," Sha Yuan said, taking another bite. He wasn't sure if he was that hungry or if it was really good. It was probably even better since he wasn't technically supposed to have an extra one. "I got Mobei-jun to try tanghulu once."

Luo Binghe's eyebrows raised. "Really?"

"Yeah, he said it was too sweet for him, but you should definitely try one after he's frozen it." It was probably the closest thing to ice cream they could get in this universe.

"I didn't know you and Mobei-jun were friends," Luo Binghe said carefully, then he stared out at the inn in the distance. "I don't think I knew Mobei-jun had friends."

Sha Yuan gracefully snorted and almost choked on the bite he'd taken. "We bonded when Ling-jie kept using me as free babysitting and him as a bodyguard/transport."

Luo Binghe's chuckle was dry. "That does sound like her." He glanced at Sha Yuan as they approached the inn. "Is that how you got into teaching?"

"Basically," Sha Yuan said. He wondered if he'd get murdered by asking Luo Binghe if he had issues with dyslexia. It *was* genetic and half his kids had it. He'd probably cultivated or halo Protagonist-ed past it by now if so.

"And you… like my children," Luo Binghe had a habit of not phrasing things as a question, but there was the hint of doubt with this statement.

"I love your children," Sha Yuan said easily, walking into the inn. He turned back as Luo Binghe seemed to pause at the door before following him inside.

“I’m not used to teachers like that,” Luo Binghe said, awkwardly.

Sha Yuan’s mouth twisted. No, he wouldn't have been. No wonder he was so interested in what Sha Yuan was like.

“You should’ve been,” Sha Yuan said.

Luo Binghe didn’t respond, but rather went to the front of the inn where Sha Yuan had the lovely enjoyment of watching him be berated by an elderly woman who refused to charge the Emperor for a room. It was incredibly charming to see the disgruntled look on Luo Binghe’s face as he muttered something about leaving coins underneath the pillows when they left.

Sha Yuan was too busy enjoying the moment as they walked up the stairs. He’d gone stupid before realizing they were walking to a *single* room. Suddenly he remembered the gossip he’d tried not to think about involving qi deviations and Luo Binghe potentially adding a husband to his harem—or at least actively trying the idea out.

It wasn’t that Sha Yuan objected to the idea of a one night stand with the Emperor. Even if he hadn’t determined his transmigrated body was gay, he was pretty sure the Protagonist wouldn’t even count in his first body. Who *wouldn’t* want to sleep with Luo Binghe? Literally no one. It was a plot point. It was just really unexpected to even have the option.

Sha Yuan was trying to decide if there was any moral justification that would account for Sha Hualing not murdering him and also if there *was* could he could feel okay and not incredibly guilty—when he opened the door and there were two beds.

A faint blow to his ego and then Sha Yuan moved past it, to settle onto one of the beds (before realizing he probably should’ve let the Emperor choose his own first) and pulled his notebook out of his qiankun pouch.

It wasn’t like he was surprised. Sha Yuan didn’t think his demon body was that bad looking, but the words ‘delicate’ came to mind and he assumed whatever Luo Binghe’s type of guy was, it wasn’t him.

Crisis averted.

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It was incredibly difficult not to feel awkward when the Emperor was watching you take off your shoes. Sha Yuan tried to ignore it and shoved his boots in his pouch before wading into the cave.

“Are the boots also a part of being the Sha Clan prude?” Luo Binghe asked, smiling way too wide.

Sha Yuan barely caught himself from choking and spluttering, because he didn’t want to scare off the bugs. He refused to dignify it with any other verbal response and started wading faster.

“You don’t wear much jewelry either,” Luo Binghe pointed out.

The glow from the moss and the bioluminescent amber damsel flies was not enough to show how red Sha Yuan's face probably was. "It is difficult to sneak up on creatures unobserved when every step is an alarm."

"Mm," Luo Binghe agreed, sounding too cheerful.

Sha Yuan resisted the urge to trip him and focused on getting as much detail memorized as possible since he couldn't use his notebook in here. The moss faintly changed colors as they neared it. Sha Yuan reached out to brush his fingers against it and smiled as the heat seemed to turn the brilliant lime green into a softer shade of orange that floated upwards in almost a rainbow until it was a deep green again.

"I wish I could draw in the dark," Sha Yuan murmured to himself as they approached the bioluminescent amber damselfly nest. The wings floated in the darkness like little catches of light, almost a living essence of the bits of brightly colored ash that were whisked away by the wind in a campfire.

There was a steady hand on his shoulder and then another hand, faintly glowing with qi in front of him. Sha Yuan could barely see Luo Binghe's face but he smiled at him and dragged his notebook out, trying to get a rough sketch down and not take up too much of his time.

It was the middle of the night by the time they got back to the inn, but at some point someone had set up a bath and the items to refill it. Sha Yuan settled on his bed to finish out as much details as he could recall in his sketch before he forgot them, while Luo Binghe cleaned up.

He took a short moment to put the ugly tortoise figurine on the Emperor's pillow, while he was busy.

Fresh, clean, and steaming, the Emperor came around the privacy screen and Sha Yuan shoved every feeling about that down as far as it would go before going to replace the water and clean up himself. Some anachronisms in PIDW were hand waved with vague magical means, which Sha Yuan was not complaining about currently. It meant that the kindly old grandmother inn keeper had set up the water fount complete with an angled piece of stone that acted as a drain to outside.

Talismans warmed the water and Sha Yuan failed to swallow his audible initial satisfaction as he sunk into the bath. He'd cleaned up in the stream and his wounds had healed from the embarrassment of the 'Mistaken Identity' quest, but the hot water and oils felt like he was finally clean of it. Not to mention it had been a few days since he'd washed his hair.

It was very tempting to linger, but he wasn't alone in the room and he could see the Emperor's shaded silhouette getting into his own bed. Sha Yuan was certain the ever present and paranoid Luo Binghe wasn't actually asleep, but tried to step lightly as he went to his own bed anyway.

It was lumpy and not entirely comfortable, but better than sleeping on the ground, so Sha Yuan was not complaining. He needed these trips to not get too used to his nice fancy royal tutor living space. It was nice having company, even if it was only for a few days.

Sha Yuan was comfortably drifting off, when Luo Binghe's voice broke the silence.

"Sha Yuan?" he asked and after an affirming noise, continued. "Are my children happy?"

Sha Yuan gave the question the weight it deserved and really thought about it. "I think so," he said. Then because he could not fucking help himself added, "They'd be happier if they could spend more time with you."

At least he managed to avoid the other thing he wanted to say.

Are you *happy*?

Luo Binghe didn't respond, so Sha Yuan let it go and finally drifted off to sleep.

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Surprisingly, wife #297 did not happen at all.

Luo Binghe didn't follow Sha Yuan to his next location (a hard to find cocoon cluster of Desert Inland Crawlers), but also didn't kill Sha Yuan for the many stupid things that left his mouth, so there were no complaints.

By the time Sha Yuan got back to the Underground Palace, he was bombarded with questions from tiny Luos and given a very intense regaling of all the things he'd missed over the last month. One of them was that their father had been spending dedicated time with them individually with some frequency. Wuying seemed to blossom the most at the attention and showed off the sword forms he'd learned with severe serious enthusiasm.

"He's so much like Qingge," Mingyan said, with a sad smile. "Maybe a little more sensible."

Sha Yuan resisted the urge to poke for background questions about the Bai Zhan War God and gave her a reassuring shoulder squeeze before returning his attention to her son.

"The Little Palace Mistress is upset," Ning Yingying said, quietly over tea later.

"I don't see how that's gossip," Sha Hualing said, boredly. Sha Yuan didn't disagree. He tended to avoid the Little Palace Mistress whenever possible due to her moods influencing how often she used her whip.

"A-Luo said no again," Ning Yingying said, even more quietly.

Sha Hualing's cackle was cut off when Liu Mingyan shoved her so hard she fell sideways. "Aiyah! A-Yan is so mean to me."

"We may not like her," Liu Mingyan said, "but there's no need to enjoy her misfortune."

"What misfortune?" Sha Hualing asked, rolling her eyes. "She doesn't want a child. She wants our Husband's attention."

Sha Yuan had thoughts about that, but at least enough common sense this time not to say them out loud. Sha Hualing narrowed her eyes at him like she knew what he was thinking and he became very focused on his tea.

“A-Luo took Jian to a festival,” Ning Yingying said, “he’s been so present lately. It’s nice. I was worried after… that incident.”

“Qi deviation,” Sha Hualing said.

“We don’t know that,” Liu Mingyan retorted.

“Time travel?” Sha Yuan suggested. They all looked at him incredulously. “Stranger things have happened.”

It had to have been an extremely odd set of events for everyone to still be focused on it almost a year later. No husbands in the harem either. Come to think of it, Sha Yuan wasn’t sure Luo Binghe had added any wives either since that incident.

“You read too much, Yuan-er,” Sha Hualing said.

“I don’t know,” Ning Yingying said, toying with a braid resting on her shoulder. “He *was* acting much closer to how I remember him from when we were children.”

“He didn’t look younger,” Liu Mingyan pointed out. “He just…” Her brow furrowed. “He was different. Less.”

“Less?” Sha Yuan asked.

Liu Mingyan shook her head, seemingly frustrated she couldn’t put it into words.

“Did he fuck you on that flower trip?” Sha Hualing asked Sha Yuan out of nowhere.

She had waited *exactly* until he was mid sip of tea so not only did Sha Yuan choke on it, it went up his nose.

“You’re so mean,” Ning Yingying said, laughing as she playfully hit Sha Hualing. Completely ignoring Sha Yuan *dying* and coughing into a napkin.

The worst of it was that Liu Mingyan was staring at him like she also wanted an answer.

“*No*,” Sha Yuan said, still choking slightly. He glared at Sha Hualing. “Fuck you.”

She beamed at him. “Are you sure you didn’t?”

“Yes, I’m sure,” Sha Yuan said, heatedly. “Who would forget that?”

He put his head in his hands almost immediately when he realized what that sounded like.

“Aww, your ears are red again,” Ning Yingying said, unsympathetically, paired perfectly with Sha Hualing’s mean laugh.

“Why would you let yourself get kidnapped if you weren’t going to at least seduce him?” Sha Hualing asked, like she was disappointed.

“Why do you want me to seduce *your* husband?” Sha Yuan retorted, dropping his hands.

“I’m bored,” Sha Hualing said with a shrug. “Besides it might cheer him up.”

“I think spending time with his children is probably cheering him up,” Sha Yuan groused. He very badly wanted to drive the topic back in that direction and away from himself.

“You should ask him out again,” Liu Mingyan said, elaborating before Sha Yuan followed the impulse to throw something at her. “On your expeditions. I think it was good for him to do something that wasn’t a debt he felt he owed.”

That was a very depressing thought. It had been nice to have company though. And Sha Yuan wasn’t really sure that Luo Binghe *had* any friends. At least not ones he wasn’t married to.

“But if you fuck him, you need to let us know the details,” Sha Hualing added.

Sha Yuan got up before he confirmed whether or not Liu Mingyan nodded in agreement and left them without cleaning up the tea he’d spilt.

***

The thing about Luo Binghe spending more time with his children, was that Sha Yuan got to spend more time with him also. He was not opposed to it even if Luo Binghe sitting in on lessons was unnerving and added a lot more pressure.

Wuying had ratted him out about the Bai Zhan Peak sword training manual, but surprisingly Luo Binghe hadn’t even been bothered. He’d actually asked Sha Yuan if the library had more materials saved from the sect. Thankfully Sha Yuan had known where the section was, because the squirrelly librarian had made himself scarce.

It was unbearably charming when Luo Binghe asked for Sha Yuan’s help to learn some of the finer aspects of the specific sword techniques so he could show Wuying later.

Sha Yuan started to think they might be becoming friends.

Friends with Luo Binghe. Not a thought he’d ever dared to have, since most of Sha Yuan’s transmigration had been prioritized with not getting entangled in the plot and potentially murdered by Luo Binghe.

He really liked it though. There was something about it, like how Sha Yuan felt when one of the children started understanding a complex technique or concept for the first time—it was the same as when he watched Luo Binghe slowly slough off whatever had been weighing him down so badly.

If Sha Yuan were still going to tea gossip sessions, he might have asked the three first wives about whether or not this was a recent occurrence or if their husband had been this unhappy

for this long. From what he remembered about the original source material, he wouldn't have been surprised if he had been.

He was talking to Luo Binghe about his next expedition—Sha Yuan hadn't quite worked up to inviting him yet, but was picking his brain while he had it for the best areas to explore—when they overheard a rather stupidly loud conversation about last year's 'qi deviation.' The irritation on Luo Binghe's face was enough to send the two servants scattering once they'd realized they'd been caught.

"It's been a fucking year," Luo Binghe muttered. Then he glanced at Sha Yuan and let out a defeated sigh. "Ask."

"Ask what?" Sha Yuan was offended by the angry look he shot him. "I literally wasn't here so I have no idea what you're talking about. I was looking at frogs that someone had painted and weren't actually a new species."

Luo Binghe glared at him like Sha Yuan would make that up—if he hadn't gotten an enchantment for waterproof paint out of it, it would've been a huge waste of time. Then finally he grunted and gestured and they went to his giant office. At least Sha Yuan could sit in a chair now.

Luo Binghe stared at the door as it closed, glaring at it like it offended him. "I did not have a qi deviation."

"Okay," Sha Yuan said, ignoring the responding glare. It was reflexive at this point, kind of like a cat that only knew how to hiss to communicate. "Did you want to tell me what you did have?"

The very mature Emperor punched the door and then stomped off to lean against his desk with his arms crossed. "I went to another… here. That had a different me."

"Alternate dimensions?" Sha Yuan said, far too excitedly. He folded his mouth close and shrank in his chair. "Sorry."

The look Luo Binghe gave him was at least not violent, it was almost dismissive. Sha Yuan didn't know how to take that.

"There was a weaker me," he said. "One who… didn't have to work hard and still…" He glared at the door.

"You switched places?" Sha Yuan guessed. It must've been Xin Mo. That actually made a lot of sense, what with the dimensional cutting properties of the sword. It would've been a cool thing to explore if Airplane wouldn't have likely used it for mirror episodes with gender flipped versions of Luo Binghe's enemies to be new wives.

Yeah probably a good idea it hadn't come up or that at least Sha Yuan had been dead for it when it did. Just imagining the comments he'd be compelled to leave on that garbage was increasing his blood pressure.

“For two days,” Luo Binghe said, still glaring at the door. “He was…” He cut himself off and looked like he might try punching the door again. If he did, Sha Yuan was pretty sure it was going to blast off the hinges.

“You don’t have to tell me if you don't want to,” Sha Yuan said. “But it seems like it might help if you do.”

He let the silence sit as he watched Luo Binghe process that. For once his face was easy to read. Finally some tension came out of his shoulders and he leaned back on the desk, resting against his hands, palms flat on the surface. “He didn’t suffer like I did and he didn’t do the things I did because of it.”

Made sense for an alternate universe. Sha Yuan had a million questions, but was not stupid enough to ask them so sat silently to see if Luo Binghe provided more information.

“What do you know about Shen Qingqiu?” Luo Binghe asked, glancing at Sha Yuan.

Arguably too much, but in the case of knowing in this lifetime realistically, Sha Yuan kept it vague. “He was scum.”

Luo Binghe’s lips twitched for a moment, seemingly unsure if they wanted to go down or up. He looked at the door again, almost lost. “He was there. Alive. And… different. It wasn’t the Shizun I knew. They were,” he made a face, “together.”

“That’s unethical,” Sha Yuan said automatically.

Luo Binghe cocked an amused eyebrow at him, but then shook his head and sighed. “He was happy. *They* were happy. He’d done nothing to earn it and it still was.”

The suddenly sleeping with men thing made a little more sense in a way Sha Yuan did not want to think about in too great a detail—he did feel a little less like his ego had been hit when he wasn’t a candidate. “And you don’t think you’re happy?”

Luo Binghe snorted, dry and humorless. He looked at Sha Yuan frankly. “You do?”

“Not really,” Sha Yuan said, honestly. “That doesn’t mean you can’t be.”

“I thought of that,” Luo Binghe said, lips twisting in frustration. “But my Shizun was nothing like that even if I hadn’t killed him and stealing that pathetic me’s Shizun is a farce.”

There were probably other Shen Qingqius in other dimensions that might have worked too, but that seemed like a terrible idea to bring up. It also hadn’t been what Sha Yuan was implying, but the Protagonist would do as a Protagonist does and that was probably the most clear solution to Luo Binghe’s problem from his own perspective.

“Can I…” Sha Yuan started and then frowned. He could feel Luo Binghe’s full attention on him. “Can I say something that might sound bad and you promise you won’t murder me?”

“You don’t usually ask first,” Luo Binghe said, dryly, but at Sha Yuan’s continued stare shrugged. “Fine.”

“I don’t know if sex or romance with someone is the problem,” Sha Yuan said. “You have almost 300 wives. Most of whom are great. You have wonderful children. You are the *Emperor*. If you're still not happy… you’re not going to find that by trying whatever that lesser Binghe did.”

“Lesser Binghe?” Luo Binghe asked, but he seemed pleased by the moniker.

“I could come up with something more creative and insulting if I had more time,” Sha Yuan offered.

Luo Binghe shook his head. “So what *do* I do? Is it just…” he didn’t finish, his jaw shifted and he frowned at the floor. His face was miserable, but worse there was some kind of acceptance on it.

“You aren’t destined to be unhappy,” Sha Yuan said. “That would be bullshit,” he added. “You just have to figure out what you want that isn’t… defined by what you went through.”

“Very vague,” Luo Binghe said, but he didn’t seem at all irritated. His eyes were soft when he looked at Sha Yuan.

“Friends,” Sha Yuan suggested. “Plural. That you’re not married to.”

“And is Sha Yuan offering to be my friend?” Luo Binghe asked, almost mockingly.

Sha Yuan shrugged, fighting a smile. “I wouldn’t mind it.”

“Mm,” Luo Binghe said and crossed his arms over his chest again. “Might save you from getting kidnapped less.”

“*One* time,” Sha Yuan protested and felt a little warm space in his chest open up when Luo Binghe laughed.

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Sha Yuan’s next expedition wasn’t going to happen for at least a few months, so instead of waiting that long, he invited Luo Binghe to his weekly weiqi game with Mobei-jun.

It was… awkward.

“I’m getting alcohol,” Sha Yuan declared after the first hour of pitted silence. “Or we need to go kill something.”

“Kill something,” Mobei-jun and Luo Binghe both said at once.

Well, they were bonding at least. Going on a Night Hunt with both Mobei-jun and Luo Binghe was incredible overkill (literally), but also very funny watching them try to one-up each other with different amazingly cool kill shots against huge dangerous beasts.

Sha Yuan took care of the not-as-large threats while they were distracted. He didn’t realize they’d been watching him until he glanced up from the pile of dead Crimson Tuft Hyenas and

saw Mobei-jun's lack of expression and Luo Binghe's slightly impressed one.

He also looked surprised, but Sha Yuan was ignoring that.

They ended the evening with jars of demon wine that Sha Yuan had also had the foresight to bring.

Luo Binghe gestured to Sha Yuan's bare feet with his jar and raised his eyebrows. Sha Yuan ignored him and sipped at his drink. If he wanted to know how Sha demon feet worked he needed to ask his wife.

It was still quiet, but less awkwardly so. He did not expect Mobei-jun to be the one to break the silence. "How do you decide your strategy on how to bed?" he asked Luo Binghe.

Sha Yuan barely managed not to choke on his wine. That question was twice as many words as he usually used.

"Strategy?" Luo Binghe asked incredulously, raising an eyebrow.

There was a small flicker of annoyance that only a trained Mobei-jun observer could have identified.

"Not all of us can smile broadly and have women faint in our general direction," Sha Yuan said, dryly. He ignored Luo Binghe's smug expression and directed his attention to Mobei-jun. "It can't *just* be bedding if you're asking."

Mobei-jun shrugged which was the answer.

Sha Yuan very badly wanted to ask who, but knew they'd never get anywhere if he pried too much. He did need some basic information, however. "Human or demon?"

"Demon," Mobei-jun said. "Does that matter?"

"En, maybe," Sha Yuan said. "I didn't realize most of the Southern Demons thought picking a fight was a courting ritual until Ling-jie laughed at me, but humans definitely don't do that."

"How many demons were courting you?" Mobei-jun asked, frowning thoughtfully.

Sha Yuan rubbed his nose and took a larger sip before shrugging. He could be taciturn too.

"They do not act in a way that I understand demons would act," Mobei-jun said. "Like how you enjoy spending time with children."

"That is your traumatic childhood talking and not a true statement about general caretaking," Sha Yuan retorted. "Like how both our uncles were assholes isn't a general damning of all uncles."

"Some humans don't like children either," Luo Binghe agreed, lightly. He was gazing at his drink rather than preening. He shook off whatever thought of probably his own traumatic

childhood had overtaken him and regarded Mobei-jun. “Bed or wed?”

“There’s an *in between*,” Sha Yuan objected, but was completely ignored. His friendship plan was working too well.

“Wed,” Mobei-jun said with a nod.

“Spend some time with them and then ask them,” Luo Binghe said, like it was that easy.

Sha Yuan snorted and stared out at the scenery. They probably should have collected the monster hides before they started drinking.

“Yuan-er has a thought?” Luo Binghe asked with false sweetness.

Sha Yuan glared at him. *Yuan-er.* What a dick. He was probably older than him if he counted both lifetimes. Sha Hualing only got away with that, because she was family.

“My thought is that you think ‘spending some time’ is a single night of life or death scenario, get caught up in the adrenaline and then make a lifetime commitment. Try taking them on a date, *Bing-ge*.”

[System notification. Protagonist satisfaction points: +100!]

Yeah I could fucking tell from the smug expression on his stupid face. Sha Yuan thought at it and closed the window. He mentally made a note to never call him that again.

“A date?” Mobei-jun asked.

“Uhh,” Sha Yuan struggled with an easy PIDW appropriate explanation for a moment. “You… do something you might both enjoy to get to know each other and,” he gestured awkwardly with his hand, “hold hands, kiss, or have sex or whatever.”

Luo Binghe was laughing at him and Sha Yuan was rewarded with another 25 Protagonist satisfaction points. Asshole.

“Neither of you are good at this,” Mobei-jun said and then downed his entire jar in one go.

He stood, nodded to both of them and then portaled away.

“Is it dangerous to drink and portal?” Sha Yuan wondered.

“You are very strange, Yuan-er.”

“I will throw this jar at you,” Sha Yuan threatened. “I don’t care if it’s treason.”

It was infuriating how good Luo Binghe looked when he was laughing at him.

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“No,” Sha Yuan said, flatly. “Stop trying to embarrass me.”

“Never,” Sha Hualing said, but then did that stupid annoyed childish wriggle she always did when she was frustrated. “Yuan-er, please? I don’t want them for me.”

“Who do you want them for?” Sha Yuan asked and immediately regretted it.

“A-Yan!” she said, emphatically as they walked. “She likes them and she won’t have any from there if you’re going that far north.”

“That is… so much more than I wanted to know about Mingyan,” Sha Yuan said, rubbing the middle of his forehead with his knuckle.

“Please,” Sha Hualing said again, she held her hands in a prayer position and badly attempted the same look A-Fei used to get away with murder.

“I’ll *look* if I have time,” Sha Yuan finally said. “And I’m alone,” he added. There was no way in hell was browsing yellow books with Luo Binghe lurking in the background. The man teased him enough as it was.

Sha Hualing bounced on her toes, jingling happily and shook him a little. “Such a good, Yuan-er. My favorite cousin.”

“Only cousin still alive,” Sha Yuan pointed out, shrugging her off. She wouldn’t follow him into the library at least.

“True,” Sha Hualing said and looked distastefully at the direction he was going, but in a rare turn of events managed to resist mocking him about it before saying her goodbyes.

Sha Yuan shelved the issue as ‘future Sha Yuan’s problem’ and got to work on what he’d actually come in for. He spent over an hour looking through the library volumes before getting frustrated. He knew they had some northern territory bestiaries, but they didn’t seem to be with the rest of them. It wasn’t like he was expecting the Chinese Library Classification system, but the books could’ve at least been organized more consistently by category.

He was about ready to give up, when he overheard the librarian muttering under his breath as he passed Sha Yuan around the stacks.

Sha Yuan *definitely* heard the words ‘air conditioning’ — he walked backwards, trailing the direction the librarian was going in, trying to catch anything else, but the guy had gone back to focusing on his actual tasks. Sha Yuan frowned.

System. Are there any other transmigrators here?

[Host is User 001 in this instance.]

Of course it wouldn’t answer his question. Sha Yuan sighed and watched the demon who he was now realizing was not a squirrel, but a fox spirit who perpetually had their ears folded. What was the name of this guy again?

Sha Yuan made his way back to the intake desk near the front of the library and looked for any kind of nameplate with characters on it. The guy had been around for a while so it was

probably—

He saw it and wondered how the hell it had taken him this long to notice. *Da Feiji.*

"*Airplane*?"

"What?" squeaked a voice, followed by the thumps of what had to be several books falling.

Sha Yuan made his way towards the fox spirit. He really did look like a squirrel with his ears pinned like that. Also only one tail. Pathetic really.

"Please tell me you know what the internet is," the fox spirit, whose feet were now covered by misplaced books said.

An hour or so later and Sha Yuan was leaning up against one of the back stacks of the Underground Palace library with the author of *Proud Immortal Demon Way*, Airplane Shooting Towards the Sky.

"Like a few decades at this point," Sha Yuan answered.

"That is crazy, Cucumber-bro," Airplane said, shaking his head. His ears were actually kind of tempting to pet when they were up. Maybe that's why he kept them down. "You commented on the night I d-i-e-d."

"People can spell here," Sha Yuan pointed out. 'Commented' and not 'left a scathing anger filled hate review that literally made him choke to death' was a polite way to put it. "So you've been here less time?"

"A few years," Airplane said, sounding disappointed. "I didn't get to live any of the plot."

"I think I'd be a lot more annoyed at you if I'd *had* to live any of the plot," Sha Yuan said. It had been fairly easy to avoid it as it was. Being a demon had been great too, minus not being able to fly on a sword. He was still kind of salty about that one.

"Fair, fair," Airplane said.

"Hey, where did you leave off? In the plot, I mean," Sha Yuan asked. He'd been wondering, especially since Luo Binghe still hadn't gotten past 296 wives.

"The last chapter you read," Airplane said, his fox ears flattening. "I can't even use my amazing knowledge of the future to manipulate my fate here. What a ripoff."

"So stuff has been happening that you didn't write?" Sha Yuan debated mentioning the alternate universe. It wasn't like he could use it for stupid wife plots anymore.

Airplane shook his head. "Nah, bro. I mean I *had* an ending plotted, but it wasn't wild crying Binghe appears screaming for his Shizun and then is suddenly gay."

Sha Yuan was beginning to think everyone but him had been here to witness that. "What was your ending?"

Airplane shrugged, looking defeated. “I wasn’t sure how to make it work with all the changes I did to… you know make money—don’t give me that look Mister Premium Subscriber!” He wrapped his singular fox tail around himself. “My original plot. The outline I lost. I had the Protagonist never aging, but forever alone while everyone died around him. It worked better with the whole cycle of—ow, WTF, bro!”

Sha Yuan barely resisted punching his arm again. “What the *fuck* kind of ending is that?”

“I didn’t know it was *real*,” Airplane protested. “I was just writing stupid shit to make rent. If I had any idea I’d be floated into my own universe I would’ve at least given myself indoor plumbing.”

“That would’ve been a nice anachronism,” Sha Yuan agreed, but he was distracted thinking about how terrible that ending was applied to the living breathing Luo Binghe who was here and his friend.

Luo Binghe suffers and then gets revenge and zero resolution? Not a single shred of happy ending? That was… that was unacceptable.

“Did he have *any* sort of love interest that had potential to… you know make him happy?” Sha Yuan asked, ignoring his own previous advice to the man. If they were going with tropes, maybe Luo Binghe'd been thinking in the right direction after all. “Maybe one he hasn’t met yet?”

“No, but I do remember the ‘Liu Mingyan is the Superior Wife’ essay you posted on the forum,” Airplane said, cocking an eyebrow and a fox ear.

“I stand by that,” Sha Yuan said. “Especially now. She’s awesome.”

“Isn’t he married to your cousin?” Airplane said, lowering his voice.

“And like almost 300 other people,” Sha Yuan hissed. “Also thanks for the stupid fucking wife plots, someone mistook me for her and I almost got my neck torn off.”

Airplane seemed to be assessing him a little too closely. “I mean, I can see it.”

“Okay, I officially hate you,” Sha Yuan said, standing up.

“You’d need to wear less,” Airplane added.

The only enjoyment Sha Yuan had was that when he turned around to flip him off, Airplane knew what that meant.

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The combination of Sha Yuan having too much on his mind and the furred collar covering his ears, meant Sha Yuan didn’t realize Luo Binghe was trying to get his attention until an annoying, “*Yuan-er*,” came out.

“I’m definitely not responding to that,” Sha Yuan said, refusing to look in his direction.

Luo Binghe chuckled. “You weren’t responding to anything, Xiao-Yuan.”

Sha Yuan elbowed him, which did absolutely nothing except amuse the asshole.

“Shizun?” Luo Binghe suggested probably before thinking about it, based on the way he immediately frowned and then glared out into the blaring white snowfall.

“Why were you trying to get my attention?” Sha Yuan asked, hoping to slide into a distraction from whatever Luo Binghe was thinking. It was hopefully not what Sha Yuan was thinking about which was a bad ending and destiny being bullshit.

“I think we need to go further inland,” Luo Binghe said, pointing towards a spot where the two mountains that had combined split apart. It seemed to create a chasm and not a valley, which would be pretty dangerous to walk through.

“Ugh,” Sha Yuan said. It was clearly where they had to go. “It’ll take all day to get there.”

Luo Binghe stared at him, unimpressed.

“What?”

He pulled out Xin Mo.

Sha Yuan laughed at himself. “Well sorry, I forgot. Not all of us have swords that can rip through space. My demon powers involve stabbing things.”

“It can do that too,” Luo Binghe said, with a wolfish grin. He didn’t cut a portal like Sha Yuan was expecting, but instead tossed Xin Mo until landed in the air. Then he hopped up on the sword and held his hand out to Sha Yuan.

He tried very hard not to look as excited as he felt. It clearly did not work based on how smug Luo Binghe looked as Sha Yuan climbed up on the sword. He even let him get in front which was so incredibly cool and made it feel like Sha Yuan was the one directing it.

It was *so* unfair he couldn’t have a spiritual weapon. Floating down though the snowfall on a weightless piece of metal that vibrated underneath Sha Yuan’s feet made the painful whip of cold air on his face feel refreshing. It also took an all day journey and cut it into less than fifteen minutes.

He could not stop grinning once they’d landed near the craggy split between the mountains. “I have always wanted to do that.”

“You should have said something,” Luo Binghe said. He was still smiling but it wasn’t quite as obnoxious.

“Ah yes, Junshang, please take time out of your busy ruling schedule to take this tutor on a sword ride,” Sha Yuan said, snorting.

“I thought I was Bing-ge,” Luo Binghe said with a mean smirk.

Fuck. He was never going to let that one go. Sha Yuan pulled his furred hood up over his head tightly and walked past him.

“Careful,” Luo Binghe said, grabbing his arm and pulling him back a step. “The ground’s loose. Sometimes… spots that merge are like this.”

“Huh,” Sha Yuan said, attempting to lean towards it—hard to do with Luo Binghe still holding his arm, so he glanced back at him. “Are there are lot of spots like this?”

“Not in well populated areas,” Luo Binghe said. “Or I’d try and seal them.”

“Is it a dimensional rift then?” Sha Yuan asked, wriggling his arm until Luo Binghe let it go so he could try and get a (careful) better look.

“Occasionally,” Luo Binghe said. “I think this is only physical. The areas overlapping must’ve been too different to merge properly.”

Sha Yuan shook his head. “I don’t know how you even managed it. That must’ve taken an insane amount of will and concentration to do as seamlessly as you did.”

He glanced back after a moment of extended silence. “What?”

Luo Binghe’s face was thoughtful. “You… like the realm merge.”

Sha Yuan’s lips twitched up. He could never ask a question, because he knew he was right when he guessed, but still said it in a way that made Sha Yuan have to answer. “I didn’t live in the human realm, but the Demon Realm was a barren landscape where I grew up. The ecosystem is thriving now. Plus—” He pointed upwards. “The sky is pretty great.”

“Some humans did not appreciate it,” Luo Binghe said, sourly. “I think some of my wives resent it.”

“You can’t please everyone,” Sha Yuan said with a shrug.

“Even yourself,” Luo Binghe agreed, with a sigh. He didn’t let Sha Yuan respond to that and instead pointed towards where the most secure footing appeared to be.

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A dimensional rift was underneath the physical one, which Sha Yuan and Luo Binghe only found out when some eldritch horror ice octopus was trying to kill them. There had not been any time for fun sketches and by the time it was dead, it was amazing they weren’t as well.

“Don’t fuss,” Sha Yuan snapped at Luo Binghe, while he tried to assess his wounds. It worked, thankfully, Luo Binghe stopped resisting Sha Yuan’s medical assessment and just stared at him with one of those all encompassing looks that Sha Yuan could not give a shit about trying to interpret with this much bleeding.

They were buffeted from the wind in the cave system at least, but it wasn’t exactly warm. Sha Yuan did *not* want Luo Binghe using Xin Mo to portal until he started healing again. There

was a radiating blackness—qi but not quite demonic, coming from his wounds.

"You're not healing fast enough," Sha Yuan murmured. He pulled out some healing salve and bandages, trying to clean up the area. He wished he had spiritual energy, but some well placed demonic energy seemed to have a similar effect, dissipating that weird not-qi. It still wasn't healing as fast as Sha Yuan would have liked, but hopefully resting for a bit would fix that.

He glanced up from Luo Binghe's wounds to see him still staring at him. "What? Just because you can heal fast doesn't mean you should throw yourself at a weird black void tentacle thing. I'm assuming the wounds still hurt when they happen."

Luo Binghe blinked a few times and then shook off whatever was making him give that vacant expression. "You're bleeding," he said, thumb brushing against Sha Yuan's forehead and coming back red.

It was too cold to feel it, which was probably a bad thing. Sha Yuan dug around for more bandages. "Is it bad?"

"It's… not good," Luo Binghe said and then took the bandages and salve from Sha Yuan and made him sit against the stone wall. Sha Yuan winced a little but Luo Binghe did a fairly quick job bandaging up the wound on his forehead. "You *don't* heal as fast," he pointed out, a little sulkily.

"Fine, neither of us should go up against terrifying void beasts," Sha Yuan agreed. He leaned his head back against the wall, exhausted. "I really want to draw it. That's bad, right?"

"Yes," Luo Binghe said, but there was a faint touch of humor in his tone. "We should rest. I'll cut us a way out in a bit."

"Hours," Sha Yuan said. "You will rest until you at least stop bleeding."

"Mm," Luo Binghe said, tiredly. The fact that he wasn't arguing was a bad sign. He slumped a little and leaned his head against Sha Yuan's shoulder, which was nice. He was warm at least.

It was absolutely ridiculous and Sha Yuan would not think about it, but he also was coming down from the adrenaline of the fight and the clutch of fear in his chest when Luo Binghe was that injured, so he brought his hand up and stroked it through the Emperor's hair.

And Luo Binghe let him.

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Luo Binghe had been quiet while they made their way back from the Northern Territories (Sha Yuan had insisted on a *short* portal and then stopping somewhere to reassess their injuries). Then he seemed to disappear.

It had been two weeks and Sha Yuan hadn't realized how much of a fixture Luo Binghe's friendship had become until its absence overwhelmed him.

He was the Emperor. He had shit to do. Sha Yuan would not take it personally.

And if he kept telling himself that maybe he'd believe it. Sha Yuan kept trying to think of something he might have said or done to piss Luo Binghe off, but couldn't settle on anything. Unless all the stupid shit Sha Yuan had managed to say before had finally registered.

"I didn't have a chance to go to any bookstores," Sha Yuan said later, while he was talking to his cousin.

Sha Hualing did not seem to find that a good excuse. "Ask your ice boyfriend to take you."

Sha Yuan couldn't decide if arguing against the boyfriend comment or pointing out that Mobei-jun wasn't a ride-share was the right thing to bring up first, so he decided to say neither of them. "Look, A-ma asked me to visit, so I will check out the bookstores near home. Is that acceptable?"

"*I* could've done that," Sha Hualing said, stuffily.

"And yet Ling-jie didn't," Sha Yuan said. The half-hearted glare he got probably meant that was good enough. He didn't know why she cared so much about getting Liu Mingyan basically porn, but he really didn't want to know if he was being honest.

The way home was nice. He always enjoyed taking in the scenery. Nicer if he'd been able to fly a sword or cut a portal, but fine on horseback too. He'd only had to stop a couple of times since he traded out horses halfway and didn't really need to sleep every night.

Sha Yuan felt hollow as he approached the Southern boundary to the Sha fortress. He was looking forward to seeing his mother, but while he was approaching the fortress he realized it didn't really feel like home anymore. He didn't know what to make of that.

This time when Sha Yuan was ambushed, he reacted appropriately. One butterfly sword was gutting an attacker while the other was slashing another behind him.

Unfortunately, this time when Sha Yuan was ambushed, it wasn't a group of low level canon fodder villains.

It was his uncle.

"You're not dead?" Sha Yuan asked and his split second of surprise lost him the fight as his much larger uncle, Jiuchong-jun, broke both his arms and sent him to the floor.

"Greetings, nephew," Jiuchong-jun said, smiling before he slammed his boot into Sha Yuan's face.

At least he wasn't being mistaken for Sha Hualing again.

Chapter End Notes

Sha Yuan: Being Luo Binghe's bestie is great! All the benefits of hanging out, but completely free of wife plots!
Sha Yuan: Why is my evil uncle here?

Chapter 3: Part 3

Chapter Summary

The lovers part of friends to lovers.

Chapter Notes

~9.2k

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sha Yuan was pretty sure he was in the Sha Clan Fortress. Or at least somewhere nearby. His head was pounding and his arms were burning in a dull deep pain. He was also tied with rope that was smothering his demonic energy.

“I see the little rat is awake,” Jiuchong-jun said, in full villain evil monologue voice.

“Mm,” Sha Yuan said, blearily. He felt on the edge of passing out again but knew that was a bad idea. Unfortunately with his arms broken and the way his hands were tied, there was no way to try and use his claws this time. Smarter villains, better bondage. “Hello, Uncle. Funny seeing you here.”

Jiuchong-jun narrowed his eyes. “You’re not going to ask about your mother?”

“I don’t really want to know, honestly,” Sha Yuan said. Either she was dead and he still couldn't do anything no matter how pissed he got or she was fine and he didn’t need to worry.

“I can never understand you,” Jiuchong-jun growled, but at least didn’t tell him. It was nice. Dealing with a high IQ villain. Practically a mini-boss. Definitely an upgrade.

He wondered if his friendship rated high enough for Luo Binghe to save him again or if whatever led to weeks of silence meant he was on his own.

“I’m not a very good bargaining chip if you’re trying to get back at Ling-jie,” Sha Yuan pointed out. He couldn’t think of why else he was here. Specifically lured back to capture.

He was not counting this as a kidnapping. It was not a wife plot. He just had some terrible fucking family… even for demon stereotypes.

“You’re useless,” Jiuchong-jun agreed—which, harsh. “Yuan-er is pathetic and no one will really care if he’s missing, except your mother. It’ll make a statement, but won’t ruin my chances at getting my lands back.”

“If I’m useless how will it make a statement?” Sha Yuan asked, mostly to keep himself and Jiuchong-jun talking. He was in so much pain right now and didn’t really want to have more of it.

Also avoiding dying would be great.

“You’ve been teaching those royal bastards,” Jiuchong-jun said, smug and satisfied. “It’s a direct hit in a way.”

Sha Yuan felt sick thinking about it. He was right. The tiny little Luos would be so sad. They’d deal with a grief their father had literally changed worlds for them to never have to feel. Sha Yuan’s piece of crap uncle was going to hurt what was good and innocent in this universe for no reason other than a dick measuring contest for property and power.

“They’re not bastards technically,” Sha Yuan said, trying to swallow that churn of emotion. “Their parents are married.” He ignored Jiuchong-jun’s glare and added, “Also one of them is your granddaughter, you piece of shit.”

A-Fei was going to show Sha Yuan a story she was working on when he got back. He didn’t know the details, but she’d worked with Jian and at least one other adult to do illustrations. She was so excited and proud and he hadn’t even seen it yet.

“You can’t even cower correctly,” Jiuchong-jun said, in disgust. “A weak link in the Sha chain. Your mother should’ve killed you in the cradle like I told her.”

“Right, yeah I get it, you hate that A-ma isn’t an idiot and sided with the current Emperor and your child,” Sha Yuan said, at least enjoying how he was making the vessel pulse on his uncle’s forehead. “Amazing revenge. I’m *sure* it won’t end in you actually dying this time.”

“My Ling-er will come to her senses.”

Sha Yuan laughed and then almost threw up, because *fuck* that hurt. He grimaced and made himself meet his uncle’s stupid smiling face. “You can’t even fight the weak link without six —oh wait four now—hired thugs. She’s not going to respect you. She doesn’t even like you. You’re an asshole. She probably would’ve betrayed you without Luo Binghe’s he—”

The force of his uncle back handing him across the face, flooded Sha Yuan with vertigo that made it impossible to keep upright.

He definitely blacked out, because the room had completely shifted when his eyes opened again. Jiuchong-jun was yelling and—oh Sha Hualing was stabbing him. That was a nice view. He tried to stay awake for it but felt himself losing grip on consciousness again.

“Yuan-er,” Sha Hualing said, shaking his shoulder and jostling his bound broken arms.

“Fucking ow,” Sha Yuan said, coming to again. He blearily looked around hoping to see a Jiuchong-jun shaped corpse. His vision felt grey around the edges which had to be bad. His neck hurt too for some reason.

“His arms are broken,” said a very steady, very terrifying voice. It got Sha Hualing to slice through his bindings at least, for whatever help that was.

As his demonic energy started to cycle again, Sha Yuan realized that was a lot of help. Also it *hurt*. Fuck.

He squinted in what he was pretty sure was Luo Binghe’s direction. “This doesn’t count as a kidnapping because he was going to kill me.”

There was no responding laugh. Also his cousin was letting him rest his head on her lap.

“Fuck, am I dying?” Sha Yuan asked.

“You look like shit,” Sha Hualing said, her voice steady and angry, but her fingers oddly gentle now that she wasn’t shaking his broken arms.

“You always think that,” Sha Yuan retorted.

At least that got a laugh or the echo of one. Not from the Emperor who…didn't seem to be in the room anymore. Maybe Sha Yuan had been hallucinating.

“They’re getting a healer,” Sha Hualing said. “We’re still rounding up the traitors who supported this.”

“A-ma?” Sha Yuan asked, immediately regretting it and wishing he waited.

“She’s fine,” Sha Hualing said, stroking his hair of all things. “Pissed but fine.”

“Your father sucks,” Sha Yuan said. His neck really, really hurt. It was a sharp pain, so probably a sword or knife—from where it felt the worst if it had been much higher or deeper he would’ve had trouble talking.

“I’m going to kill him.”

Sha Yuan didn’t feel like moving his head, but he tried to express his annoyance. “You haven’t?”

“Saved Yuan-er’s stupid life instead,” she said, shortly. “You didn't even get me A-Yan’s books.”

“Uncle did say I was useless,” Sha Yuan said. He could feel Sha Hualing’s tender grip on his hair tighten before she removed her hand. “Ling-jie likes me,” he said, delirious and therefore delighted by the realization.

“Shut up,” Sha Hualing said. “Idiot.” She started stroking his hair again. She kept doing it as the healer finally showed up and he started to feel less like soup in a demon body. He was…

very tired though and decided it was okay to pass out again.

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Sha Yuan's mother was never going to let him leave at this rate.

"The healer said I'm fine to get out of bed," he said.

Sha Heiyin stared him down with a glare that would've terrified the Emperor. He acquiesced and sank back into his bed.

Apparently he'd been unconscious for two days. No one called it a coma, but he wasn't even sure the PIDW verse used that classification. If he'd been a bigger character then maybe he would've had some kind of spiritual awakening or epic out of body experience.

He mostly remembered passing out and then waking up again, weirdly groggy for how much sleep he'd apparently gotten.

"I killed two of them," Sha Yuan added.

"One," his mother said. "The other one was gravely wounded, but was finished off by your cousin."

"Kill stealer," Sha Yuan muttered. She could've let him save some face and lied about it. He looked up at his mother, who was emoting fairly reasonable concern given the whole out for two days thing. "Did Uncle really tell you to kill me in the cradle?"

He'd never been particular nice to Sha Yuan, but it was more of an indifferent kind of vibe most of the time. Like Sha Yuan was some vase he really disliked but would put up with since his mother had done all the decorating.

Sha Heiyin looked away from him. "Yes. And shamefully, I might have considered it if I hadn't lost your brothers already."

"I was that scrawny, huh?" Sha Yuan tried for a light tone. It wasn't like he had been transmigrated as a baby. He was twelve and only slightly underdeveloped at that point. And he still thought he caught up well. He guessed he never realized what a big deal it was to be a Sha Clan shut-in.

Her mouth twisted and then she smoothed out his hair. "We did things differently then. I prefer it now."

Sha Yuan gave into the urge to lean against her and take comfort in the soothing stroking hands in his hair. "Me too usually."

"Of course you do," she said, softly and fond. "Yuan-er is a clever creature. You always have been."

He could have argued walking right into that trap wasn't particularly clever, but the repetitive comfort of his mother near him lulled him to sleep in a way that wasn't completely sinking

into unconsciousness.

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“Uncle Yuan!” A-Fei cried and almost tackled Sha Yuan. Her mother grabbed her waist at the last minute.

“What did I *tell* you, Feifei?” she hissed.

Completely nonplussed at the scolding, Feiyue looked up at her and blinked. “Uncle is… fragile.”

“Yes.”

“Hey!” Sha Yuan objected.

“Shut up,” Sha Hualing said, dropping her daughter back on the floor.

His basically niece approached him more slowly this time. He was still following his mother’s very strict ‘don’t get out of bed or I’ll murder you’ instructions, but cheating a bit by sitting on the edge of it. He held his arms open and the second she was close enough he wrapped her in them as tightly and smothering as she could stand.

She shook in his arms a little and he let her cry, impressed by how quickly she recovered from it. She did however, demand that he get back onto the bed so she could follow and cuddle into his side.

“They said you almost died,” Feiyue said, lip quivering.

“Who’s they?” Sha Yuan asked, frowning at her mother who waved him off, indifferently.

“The healers,” Feiyue said, then added very seriously, “And Baba was really worried.”

Sha Yuan felt his lips turn up and he looked at Sha Hualing. “Baba?”

Sha Hualing scoffed. “Jian-er asked if he could call him that and now they’re all doing it.”

“Even Wuying?” Sha Yuan asked, cocking an eyebrow.

“Well no,” Sha Hulaing admitted. “He thinks he’s too old for it.”

“Bah,” Sha Yuan said and hugged A-Fei closer. “Never too old for affection.”

“You are a disgusting disgrace of a demon,” Sha Hualing said fondly.

Sha Yuan stroked A-Fei’s hair and resisted the impulse to ask if *Baba* had actually been worried. If so, where the fuck was he? Sha Yuan didn’t even have the PIDW equivalent of a ‘get well soon’ card.

But he was the Emperor. So probably busy. Minus the fact that he could literally portal anywhere at anytime.

Maybe he'd stop feeling pissy about that at some point. Why would the Emperor care? It wasn't like Sha Yuan was even the lowest ranking wife. Luo Binghe was probably only concerned his kids might be upset… which.. well fuck Sha Yuan couldn't even be mad at that logic.

Hurt maybe. Mad, no.

He listened, absently to A-Fei's event calendar from the last few days he'd missed. Complete with several complaints about how disorganized her co-creators were being. She'd even managed to talk the librarian (Airplane) into helping her bind the book, but they were still missing a few illustrations.

"You're coming home when you're better," A-Fei said, in that infuriating way that her father did. A statement that should've been a question.

"If your Auntie allows it," Sha Yuan said.

"So no," Sha Hualing said with a snort, then regretted it immediately as A-Fei started huffing angrily and gearing up for a tantrum.

Sha Yuan could have helped, but he was apparently fragile so he let her handle it.

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It was two weeks before he was able to get back to the Underground Palace. His uncle was still on the run, which was…not great, but not something he could do anything about. Maybe he'd convert some of the plants he'd collected into poison—he could probably manage that without poisoning himself.

He could make antidotes at least if he couldn't.

Sha Yuan had to give in to a full inspection from all six little Luos and at least as many wives before he was allowed to freely roam without someone hovering.

Mobei-jun even looked slightly concerned which was a solid statement on how bad it had been.

"Can you take me up north to a bookstore?" Sha Yuan asked, once it was later in the day. He was technically exhausted from all the attention, but figured a bookstore wouldn't be that dangerous. He was also still running on the high of his cousin actually liking him and not merely tolerating his presence so he wanted to do something nice.

Mobei-jun hesitated, which was… really weird. "No," he finally said. "Not today."

"Okay," Sha Yuan said, trying not to look as annoyed as he felt. Mobei-jun wasn't actually a ride-share and he had to respect that. But he also *never* asked, so getting shot down the only time he did was pretty irritating. "Well, let me know when you'd be okay with it."

Mobei-jun nodded and then walked off. That was fairly standard at least.

He was tired but going to bed this early made him feel older than both of his lives' combined ages, so he went to the library.

"Bro!" Airplane said, his fox ears perking and then flattening again almost immediately.

"So everyone knows I almost died then," Sha Yuan guessed. It was nice this many people cared, but it was also incredibly embarrassing that this many people knew about it. Especially since there was zero way Sha Hualing would let him take credit for both kills.

"With the way B—Junshang was acting, yeah."

Sha Yuan tried to make sense of that. "What? He didn't even—don't exaggerate. I'm sure he was busy with more important things to worry about than me."

"You should… maybe talk to some of the wives," Airplane suggested, ominously as hell.

Sha Yuan frowned at him and tried to shake off the lingering irritation he had—mostly at himself—for thinking Luo Binghe would have showed up on his almost deathbed. They chatted for a little longer about absolutely nothing important and then Sha Yuan went on his way.

Sha Hualing and Ning Yingying weren't at their usual gossip corner in the largest garden, but Liu Mingyan was there, reading a yellow book. He almost turned around, but she caught his eye and he could tell she was smiling before she waved him over.

"I'm surprised the children let you out of their sight," she said. "I'm glad you're doing well."

"I probably could've come back a week ago," Sha Yuan said. "But my mother was a little… rattled."

"Understandable," Liu Mingyan said, glancing briefly in the direction of her son who was definitely not doing sword moves and absolutely putting one of his friends into a chokehold.

They both seemed to still be breathing so Sha Yuan didn't feel the need to intervene. He looked at Liu Mingyan and weighed his thoughts for a moment before speaking. "Why have multiple people implied that the Emperor was uncharacteristically frantic about the state of my health?"

Liu Mingyan's eyes were dark and heavy. "He didn't come see you, did he?"

"I assumed he had other things to do," Sha Yuan said, pleased at how unbothered he sounded.

Liu Mingyan sighed deeply and adjusted the way she was sitting. She flipped down the corner of the page she was on and set her book down. "Did anyone tell you what happened when you were captured?"

"Ling-jie saved me from a rather humiliating execution and my very myopic uncle is still on the run," Sha Yuan said.

It was at times like this, Sha Yuan really wished he could have seen Liu Mingyan's face. At least to know what expression was hidden behind that piercing stare she was directing somewhere to the left of him. "A-Ling got there after," Liu Mingyan said.

"Bi—Luo Binghe got there first?" Sha Yuan asked, more confused than he had been before he assumed he had been imagining things.

Liu Mingyan nodded. "He almost *actually* had a qi deviation. A-Ling managed to talk him down so that your uncle didn't slit your throat."

"Definitely not awake for any of that," Sha Yuan said, trying to process all of that information. Based on the healer's summation of his injuries his uncle had actually gone through with the throat slicing, but had done a shitty job of it. He rubbed the front of his neck. "Is he okay?"

"I don't know," Liu Mingyan said. "No, mostly likely. He hasn't been outside his rooms for almost three weeks except on official business and he's had little patience when he is."

Considering his normal behavior that was saying something.

Sha Yuan had hoped Luo Binghe could find meaningful platonic relationships, but he didn't expect or want them to be used for more Protagonist level angst. Maybe he'd be fine once Sha Yuan reassured him that he was not in fact a delicate backstory character to add to the death count of people Luo Binghe felt comfortable with.

"I'll see if I can talk to him," Sha Yuan said. "Thanks, Mingyan."

"Thank you, A-Yuan," Liu Mingyan said, softly with a smile in her eyes.

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A significant portion of the Underground Palace had been set aside for the royal harem and it continued to grow over the years. The Emperor's suites were not as massive, but they were close. Sha Yuan had become somewhat familiar with at least parts of this section of the palace. Mostly the small bamboo garden with an enchanted ceiling to look like the old human realm sky, Luo Binghe's office, and his drawing rooms.

Luo Binghe was not in any of those. The other options were his personal baths and his living quarters.

It was late, but it wasn't too late for him to be sleeping. Sha Yuan decided if the arrays didn't fling him backwards, he'd at least try knocking.

The door to Luo Binghe's rooms swung open violently after two knocks. Sha Yuan gave a mental prayer for any servants that had been assigned recently based on how terrifying Luo Binghe's glare was before he settled his eyes on Sha Yuan.

Then he looked… Sha Yuan didn't know what that face meant. It was closed off and searching at the same time. It was *frustrating* that he didn't know what that face meant or why Luo Binghe thought isolating himself was the solution to whatever it did mean.

What if Sha Yuan *had* died? Did he really think that Sha Yuan wanted him to revert back to old habits rather than leaning on the other people who cared about him?

“You look angry,” Luo Binghe said, still awkwardly lurking in the doorway.

“I am, I guess,” Sha Yuan said. He sighed. “Can I come in?”

Luo Binghe hesitated and Sha Yuan wasn’t sure if he’d laugh or kill him if he slammed the door in his face, but he only nodded and stepped aside so Sha Yuan could walk in.

The Emperor’s living quarters were… not what he’d been expecting. It was so simple. The fabrics and materials were obviously expensive, but it was almost cozy. There were comfortable chairs set around bookshelves and some games and a modest sized kitchen that looked well-used. It wasn’t messy (especially compared to Sha Yuan’s own much smaller living area), but it looked lived in. Something about that made him happy.

“You’re… doing well,” Luo Binghe said, awkwardly.

Sha Yuan could not help the snort. Of course that wasn’t a question. “Fully recovered,” he agreed and then walked past the kitchen to the small seating area, desperately nosy about what kinds of books were in Luo Binghe’s private library.

“The children were upset,” Luo Binghe said.

This time Sha Yuan didn't even try to stop the snort. He glanced over his shoulder at him. “Really? The children?”

Luo Binghe, Emperor of the Three Realms, was practically pouting. His brows furrowed and he still looked angry but Sha Yuan had seen that look of frustration on each of his children’s faces at one point or another and he knew what it was.

Sha Yuan sighed and settled himself in one of the comfier looking chairs. He was not standing for this conversation. “Is there a particular reason you don’t want me to know you were also upset?”

Luo Binghe looked away from him and crossed his arms. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Why?” Sha Yuan asked. “You saved my life, which thank you *again* for that by the way. What bothers you about the fact that you were upset your friend was hurt?”

“Friend,” Luo Binghe muttered, glaring at the wall.

Sha Yuan did not understand this asshole. “Did I say or do something that upset you during that trip up north? I’ve been distracted by the almost dying thing, but I do remember you pretty much avoiding me after that. I figured you were busy, but by how pissy you are right now I suspect that’s not the case.”

“It does not matter,” Luo Binghe repeated, stubbornly.

Sha Yuan rubbed his temple and reminded himself that he was not talking to one of the Emperor's children. Even as much as it currently felt like it.

"It matters to me," Sha Yuan said. "I can't fix anything if you don't tell me what's actually bothering you."

Luo Binghe's jaw shifted and he turned back to Sha Yuan with a glare. "I don't *want* or need you to fix anything."

No actually, Luo Binghe's children were far less maddening than this.

"Tough shit," Sha Yuan said. "If you don't want to be friends anymore then I at least deserve to know why."

"Deserve," Luo Binghe scoffed and then turned around. His fists were clenched at his sides. "A pointless word. A *stupid* word," he said, a rising anger in his voice that made Sha Yuan glad he wasn't closer. "I suffered for most of my life, tormented by large and small atrocities. Then toiled and clawed my way back to earn some sort of justice and *deserved* retribution."

"What does that have to do with—"

Luo Binghe spun around again, taking a few steps forward. There was a furious wave of energy surrounding him that made Sha Yuan slide back in his chair. "The universe has never been fair until I *made* it so. Things fall into place for me now. I face an untamable challenge and I find a way to overcome it. I get my due. When I went—when I went to that *other* place. I felt I deserved the kind of happiness that other me had."

Sha Yuan frowned, trying to wrap his head around what this had to do with anything going on at the moment. "You do."

It didn't seem like Luo Binghe was listening or even really looking at him. Even when his gaze was in Sha Yuan's direction it seemed like he couldn't even see him.

"When I came back to my own universe, my own home, I felt I *deserved* the same nice Shizun. I assumed it was a challenge that I would face and overcome like everything else. I thought the universe would deliver what was owed to balance out the scales of my miserable existence—and then it did." His laugh was not happy. "I got *you*."

"What?" Sha Yuan wondered if Luo Binghe was having a qi deviation and regretted putting himself against a wall with no access to an exit if he was reminding Luo Binghe of *Shen Qingqiu* of all people.

"I didn't see it," Luo Binghe said, "that was my fault. Maybe I wouldn't be so—I didn't *see* it, but you're the same. You… fuss the same. You care the same. You're—you're a *thing* I wanted from the universe."

Sha Yuan frowned at him. He was about to tell him how that did not feel like a compliment when Luo Binghe growled, picked up one of the side tables, and threw it at the wall so hard it snapped into pieces.

“Binghe,” Sha Yuan said carefully. “Take a minute. Breathe. I’m not… whatever you’re saying.”

“You are,” Luo Binghe said, nostrils flaring and glaring at anything but Sha Yuan. That would’ve been fine but it also meant he wasn’t *looking* at him let alone seeing him. “I was tricked into thinking it was real, but it’s not. It’s another demand delivered to me when I didn’t really know what I was asking for.”

Sha Yuan stood up from the chair, but didn’t move closer to him. Mostly because he might have been overwhelmed by the urge to stab him or at least flick his forehead. “Are you *kidding* me?”

Finally eyes landed on him for a second. “You’re angry,” Luo Binghe said, his voice rough.

“Yeah, no shit,” Sha Yuan snapped. “You equated my existence with being a consolation prize for your abusive teacher.”

He hadn’t known what was going on with Luo Binghe, but he sure as hell didn’t think it was *this*.

“That isn’t… this is why I didn't want to talk to you about this,” Luo Binghe said, not meeting his eyes again.

“Good instinct,” Sha Yuan said, sharply. “Also what the fuck? You think I’ve been in hibernation this entire time until the great hero Luo Binghe decided I might be useful? Do you know how demeaning that is? I get that the world revolves around you most of the time, but most of us have a life outside of your orbit.”

“You’re simplifying it because you don't understand,” Luo Binghe said.

Sha Yuan kicked the table that was separating them. It didn’t dramatically break against the wall, but it slid out of the way so he could get further into the Emperor’s face. “*You’re* simplifying it, because the idea of actually liking someone without some grand motivation is such a fucking foreign concept for you.”

“I don’t like you,” Luo Binghe said, angry and heated.

Sha Yuan had been automatically lifting up to get in his face and that made him land back on his heels. “Great. Problem solved then,” he said, roughly. Now Sha Yuan didn’t want to look at him.

“No, I—” Luo Binghe growled again and there went the other table. He grabbed Sha Yuan’s face to meet his eyes (which was fairly hypocritical). “I *like* you, because you’re what I wanted to like.”

Sha Yuan stared at him and then gave into the urge to flick the demon mark on his forehead.

If he’d been in any sort of headspace for it, he would’ve found the completely astounded look on Luo Binghe’s face as he dropped Sha Yuan’s chin and took a step back, absolutely hilarious.

“You seriously think that in the wish granting universe powers you apparently have that your subconscious desired a sarcastic demon who cannot keep from saying exactly what he thinks?”

“You flicked my forehead,” Luo Binghe said, apparently still processing that.

“Yes, because the universe willed it apparently,” Sha Yuan said, dryly. He sighed and crossed his arms. “I’ve existed a lot longer than your dimension hopping existential crisis. We met *multiple* times before that happened. And I can assure you, that if I’d been in the palace when Lesser Binghe was searching for his Shizun, he would not have confused us.”

Putting up with crybaby other Binghe would’ve been easier.

“Have I frustrated you?” Sha Yuan asked. “Have I said things that probably gave you some serious consideration to murdering me?”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Luo Binghe said, looking satisfyingly awkward again. The anger had been replaced by what seemed like uncertainty.

“Really?” Sha Yuan raised an eyebrow. “You want me to repeat some of the stupid shit I’ve said?” He didn’t wait for Luo Binghe to answer. “Why do you actually like me? Not in a comparison way, but in a Sha Clan prude standing in front of you right now way.”

Luo Binghe was regarding him a little too intently now. Sha Yuan realized he’d basically fished for compliments but he had a point, damn it.

“You’re clever. And funny,” Luo Binghe said. “You embarrass easily.” He snorted and gestured to Sha Yuan’s face which was clearly flushing. “You’re honest. Too honest,” he added. “And it makes it easy to rile you up, because obviously you’d tell me if you thought I was being…” He lost his brief amusement and gestured vaguely.

“A self-absorbed asshole?” Sha Yuan suggested.

Luo Binghe’s lips curled up slightly. “Yes, that.”

“All right,” Sha Yuan said, not really feeling like those compliments were fanning his ego much, but at least they felt real and made his point. “So do any of those things feel like your old teacher?”

The silence stretched out as that seemed to finally land.

Sha Yuan sighed and reached out to touch Luo Binghe’s arm. “I think you let yourself be vulnerable and had maybe the most insane coping mechanism in existence based on your past experiences to get around it.”

Luo Binghe looked at Sha Yuan’s hand on his arm but didn’t make any move to remove it. He met Sha Yuan’s gaze. “You like me.”

Never a goddamn question.

“Not right this moment, no,” Sha Yuan said, “but in general, yes. You’re probably my favorite person.”

He was standing far too close to Luo Binghe to hold strong against the way that *softened* his entire gaze at him. Sha Yuan dropped his hand and rubbed it across his own face, feeling like he’d just finished a particularly taxing Night Hunt.

He didn’t just *like* Luo Binghe. And he couldn’t even brush it off and use the Protagonist excuse without completely invalidating his prior argument.

“Minor delusional crisis aside,” Sha Yuan said, trying to make his voice light and not really focusing on the bookshelf he was staring at. “We are friends?”

“Yes,” Luo Binghe said. Then he added, “You’re my favorite person too, A-Yuan.”

Fuck.

Sha Yuan drew his gaze to the ceiling, wondering if there was an enchantment or the wood accents were for sound dampening. “I’m not calling you Bing-ge.”

The laugh was light and there was a strain around it, but it was still a welcome noise after weeks of not hearing it. Sha Yuan looked back at Luo Binghe in time to see him reach out to rest a warm hand on his back. There was a cutout Sha Yuan hadn’t really thought about when he’d dressed today that left the part of his spine open on his top, so the warmth from Luo Binghe’s palm was directly touching his skin.

“You blush too easily,” Luo Binghe said, sounding very fond. He was staring at Sha Yuan’s lips, his fingers on Sha Yuan’s back curled—

And then suddenly he was taking a step back and dropping his arm.

Sha Yuan’s heart was picking up and he’d completely turned off any sort of filter for this conversation in his mind. “Did you like sleeping with men?”

Luo Binghe was staring at him, for good reason.

Sha Yuan very elegantly took a step back and tried not to die on the spot. “I… mean… fuck —after the other universe, when you were trying to figure out what you were missing.”

“Some of them,” Luo Binghe said, carefully. It was worse that he wasn’t actively making fun of Sha Yuan right now. “You mentioned sex and romance wouldn’t ‘fix’ my troubles.”

“Obviously,” Sha Yuan muttered, no idea where the hell he’d been going with this, except he could still feel the ghost of Luo Binghe’s fucking hand on his back. “You were under the impression one person was going to solve a lifetime of disappointments, which… you deserve but is pretty unrealistic.”

“Is it?” Luo Binghe asked. “Is it unrealistic to think one person can make you happy? That’s… that is what I saw over there.”

Sha Yuan made himself meet Luo Binghe's eyes, raising an eyebrow slightly. "You didn't have a lot of complimentary things to say about the other you. Is that what you want? One person to—"

"Yes," Luo Binghe said, cutting him off. "That is what I want, Sha Yuan."

Being the full focus of Luo Binghe's attention was overwhelming. Sha Yuan knew this. He didn't realize how much worse it was when the attention was *this*. His uncle could've swanned back in with a chainsaw directed at him and Sha Yuan would still feel rooted to the same spot, losing himself in red tinged, incredibly deep eyes.

"Ah," Sha Yuan said, very articulately.

When he'd been incapable of resisting thinking about Luo Binghe kissing him, Sha Yuan had pictured being thrown against a wall with a kind of rough demon sparring passion. He hadn't expected a gentle hand on his jaw, sliding up to curl around the base of his neck and leaning in so slowly that his breath was a light flutter against Sha Yuan's skin before their lips met.

Sha Yuan grabbed Luo Binghe's robes. Mostly because if there was ever a time he was going to actually swoon, this was it. Even more so when Luo Binghe seemed encouraged to deepen the kiss and his other hand palmed against the dip in Sha Yuan's lower back and drew him closer.

Everything was slow, heavy, *measured*. None of it felt like the urgent rush it should've been. The same man who'd broken two tables minutes ago was gentle and treating Sha Yuan with care. It wasn't… it didn't feel like he was delicate, it felt like he was special. Even the careful way they disrobed was unhurried and Sha Yuan didn't mind, because it gave him plenty of time to take it in.

He was so distracted by the hard muscular planes of Luo Binghe's bare chest, he didn't notice he was also being stared at.

"You flush all the way down your chest," Luo Binghe said, thoughtfully and then his lips turned up higher when that made Sha Yuan even redder. "Mn, this is why you dress like a prude. Clever," he added and laid a soft torturous kiss on Sha Yuan's neck. "No one else should see you like this."

Sha Yuan really wanted to call him a hypocrite all things considered, but his traitorous body practically whimpered instead. Sha Yuan grabbed Luo Binghe's face and kissed him to cover it, but by the small breathy chuckle as Luo Binghe lifted him up and took him towards the bed, he was not sure he accomplished it.

The black sheets on Luo Binghe's bed felt expensive as Sha Yuan's bare skin slid against them when Luo Binghe gently laid him down. There wasn't a beautiful brocade of patterns or thankfully any kind of mirrored ceiling charm. It was as understated as everything the very naked man on top of him was not.

It was the *look* that was the worst, Sha Yuan decided. He could deal with the feather light almost reverent touches against his skin and even the stupidly soft things the Emperor was

saying about how he tasted and felt, but the disbelieving intensity in his stare was too much.

Sha Yuan turned his head from it, which had the added benefit of angling his neck in the direction of lips and teeth. The bite was surprising against all the other soft touches, but definitely grounding and also more than a little hot—Sha Yuan groaned. He was about to shut his eyes, to *try* and make it through this with some semblance of dignity, but he noticed something familiar on the side table.

The ugly little obsidian tortoise he'd bought almost a year ago.

Sha Yuan was not sure anything in his entire second life was as unbelievable as the realization he had in that moment. He turned his head to meet the intensity of that stare and cradled Luo Binghe's face in his hands.

"You love me," he said. It wasn't a question.

"It's why I was so angry," Luo Binghe agreed, flustered himself for once.

"Your emotional intelligence is awful," Sha Yuan said, grinning so hard it hurt. He dragged Luo Binghe down into another kiss. And then another, deeper and long enough make himself dizzy. Then fell victim to Luo Binghe's revenge as he expertly fingered him open, smirking at every stupid breathy reaction Sha Yuan couldn't resist making.

Whether it was practice, experience in similar positions, or just generally Luo Binghe being *really good* at things, Sha Yuan was not immune to the heavenly pillar filling up his insides. It was—overwhelming in a way that made him clutch to Luo Binghe's shoulders—he really should've trimmed his claws, but had no way to function enough to have a thought beyond embarrassingly wanton moans with coherent and eloquent phrases such as, "Fuck," and "Yes," and "Bing-ge, fuck, yes right there."

He came first… twice. By the time Luo Binghe was still thrusting into him, Sha Yuan was too fucked out to do anything but angle his hips higher for better access. He had no problem lying back and being taken like this, because it let him observe the slow dissolve of Luo Binghe's reverent experienced seduction. The planes of his face tightened into what might be ugly on anyone else and he grunted, thrusting in a way to chase his own climax, disjointed and inelegant.

"Fuck, I love you," Sha Yuan breathed between Luo Binghe's raw grunts of pleasure.

Luo Binghe came immediately after that, a minor look of surprise on his face—he clearly hadn't intended to let himself go.

Sha Yuan drew him closer, wrapping his legs tighter around his torso and refusing to let him pull out all the way yet. He was going to get the thrown up against the wall with demon passion at some point and judging by the way he was wrung out he would have to work on his own demon stamina, but for the moment Sha Yuan luxuriated in the simpleness of having Luo Binghe's sweaty, sated body against his own.

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“I am going to kill your uncle painfully,” Luo Binghe said later, in what was clearly his version of pillow talk.

“If you really wanted to give me a gift,” Sha Yuan said, stretching out and enjoying the privilege of running his fingers through the soft curls of Luo Binghe’s hair, “you’d let me do it.”

“Done,” Luo Binghe said, smiling too hard.

They went again after that, which Sha Yuan refused to judge either of them on because they were both demons (mostly). Being turned on by murder especially when it was warranted wasn’t that morally reprehensible.

Hours later, Sha Yuan watched as Luo Binghe toyed with his hair and murmured nonsense things. He was considering suggesting the baths out of curiosity and the necessity of cleaning up the amount of spend dripping out of him with more than a wet cloth when he registered one of the things Luo Binghe was saying.

“You can’t disband your harem,” he balked.

“What? Why not?” Luo Binghe had the nerve to sound upset. “I said I wanted one person. That’s what that means.”

Sha Yuan stared at him for a moment and then lifted himself up one elbow to face him better. “Bing-ge,” he said, enjoying the smug smile that triggered, “you’re the Emperor. Almost a third of your marriages are part of treaties.”

Not to mention, once he had to leave the blissful simplicity of this room, Sha Yuan had to deal with wives he *really* liked. Including ones who were going to demand details rather than trying to murder him—which might have been worse.

“We can renegotiate them,” Luo Binghe said, stubbornly. His face was doing that angry pout again and it was annoyingly charming now. His heavenly pillar had clearly fucked Sha Yuan stupid.

“Okay maybe,” Sha Yuan gave him. “But you’d ruin the legitimacy of your children with some too.”

“This is very irritating,” Luo Binghe huffed.

“Well you’re the one that married almost 300 people because you don’t know how to take things slow,” Sha Yuan pointed out.

“We took things very slow,” Luo Binghe said, his smile turning wolfish and then broadening as Sha Yuan felt himself flush.

Completely naked after marathon sex and this jerk could still fluster him.

“Great, I’m one of out of 297.”

That sarcastic comment did not get the reaction he'd been angling for, because Luo Binghe lifted his eyebrows. "You'd marry me?"

"Oh for fuck's sake," Sha Yuan flopped onto his back and covered face with his hands. "*Obviously*," he said, muffled through his fingers before he dropped them and kept his eyes on the gauzy black canopy rather than Luo Binghe's face.

He wondered how many women and men he'd fucked in here already.

"Even if your propensity for impulsive romantic gestures was healthy," Sha Yuan ignored Luo Binghe's objection and continued, "you're not in a position to toss aside women who've made their life here. There are factors to consider."

"I don't like most of them," Luo Binghe said, sounding far too close to a childish whine.

Sha Yuan decided not to point out that was his own fault again. "Fine. Bath. Sleep and then get paper, we're making a list."

"Yes, Shizun," Luo Binghe said, grinning.

Sha Yuan had absolutely no hesitation when he elbowed him in the throat for that. It only made the asshole laugh.

[Quest: 'A Shizun for Everyone!' has been completed! Congratulations to the host and protagonist!]

Sha Yuan glared at the air, exited out the window, and muted all the notifications, so he could focus on smothering Luo Binghe with a pillow.

He was refusing to even dignify the System with a response.

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"They won't mind," Luo Binghe said, arms curled around Sha Yuan's waist as they went over the list of women he'd taken as consorts.

"We talked about this," Sha Yuan said, ignoring the way he was comfortable settled in Luo Binghe's lap and the way the clingy jerk was nosing at his back.

"They won't," Luo Binghe insisted. "I am not suggesting divorce," he added, still sulky about it. "But Mingyan and Hualing will not care. I haven't been intimate with them in some time and even longer separately."

Sha Yuan tried to make sense of that and stared down at the names of wives number two and three. That… was not surprising now that he was seriously thinking about it. He needed to stop thinking about it, because it was bad enough picturing his cousin having sex with Luo Binghe, he did not want to think about her pillow talk about Sha Yuan with Liu Mingyan.

"What about Yingying?"

Luo Binghe seemed slightly embarrassed. “Last time she told me I didn’t need to sleep with her if I just wanted someone to talk to.”

Sha Yuan turned enough to cup his face and kissed his forehead. “Good advice.”

“You’re not allowed to give it,” Luo Binghe said, his growl too sullen to be threatening or erotic.

“Mhm,” Sha Yuan said and frowned at some of the other names. “I don’t know if the Little Palace Mistress is going to be satisfied with any situation you’d set up.”

“She can have Huan Hua Palace,” Luo Binghe said with a disinterested shrug.

Sha Yuan raised his eyebrows. “Seriously?”

“Its the only reason we got involved in the first place. Her lover at the time was unobtrusive, I probably didn’t need to seduce her as fully as I did.” He stared into the distance. “I feel… odd about that.”

“Guilt,” Sha Yuan said, making a mental note to see if Gongyi Xiao was still alive whether or not that would ease the Little Palace Mistress’s wrath, “that’s the word you’re looking for.”

He laughed at the face Luo Binghe made to that remark and shifted so he was more comfortably situated, leaning back against Luo Binghe’s chest.

They went down a few other names on the list and Sha Yuan tried to ignore the very large hand that was drifting to his naked legs, pushing aside the robe *he’d* given Sha Yuan earlier.

“Focus,” Sha Yuan said. “I have stuff to do this week that isn’t you.”

“Treasonous,” Luo Binghe grumbled, brushing his lips against the shoulder he’d managed to bare. If Sha Yuan could trust either of them at this point it would’ve made more sense to be naked for how askew Luo Binghe’s robe was on him.

“Your eldest daughter has a book presentation,” Sha Yuan reminded him. “And I don’t want the rumor mill starting before we at least have some idea of how to handle the fallout.”

“Mn,” Luo Binghe said, muffled into Sha Yuan’s skin, which was as much of an agreement as he was going to get.

“Would be great if we could take care of this *before* it becomes obvious, but you’re a lot stickier than I was expecting.”

Luo Binghe dragged him closer, hugging him from behind in a way that cut off some air circulation. He rested his head on Sha Yuan’s shoulder. “I spent almost a year wanting and not being able to touch you. I’m not depriving myself now.”

“Please,” Sha Yuan scoffed. “It wasn’t that long. You got two beds for that inn.”

There was a long silence and then an annoyed grunt. “You would have fucked me *then*?”

“I don't know how to tell you this,” Sha Yuan said, trying not to laugh. “I would have fucked you when you married my cousin.”

The list disappeared, tossed aside as Luo Binghe stood and lifted Sha Yuan up in one smooth movement, tossing his own robe aside. Sha Yuan landed on the bed with a bounce and fought the urge to laugh again as Luo Binghe pinned him to the sheets. The happiness stayed, but the laughter wasn’t quite as daunting to resist once the passionate, possessive, demon sex he’d been expecting earlier actually started.

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Sha Yuan’s uncle was captured and killed a few months into the unofficial ‘honeymoon’ period that he and Luo Binghe had settled into. Sadly, neither of them had gotten a chance to enjoy that particular execution, but Sha Hualing gave them a very detailed play-by-play.

It had been both harder and easier to significantly reduce the harem to a reasonable number. Most of the consorts who stayed weren’t actually still expecting amorous visits from their husband so Sha Yuan managed to avoid the majority of the harem plots once the rumor about them became obviously true (which true to form and Luo Binghe’s *complete* inability to watch his fucking hands was very quickly).

Ning Yingying, Liu Mingyan, and Sha Hualing were crucial pieces of Luo Binghe’s empire and actually acknowledging that (and getting flicked in the forehead by Sha Yuan when he tried to micromanage) gave the Emperor a lot more of his own time.

The children adjusted well, which Sha Yuan thought had a lot more to do with Luo Binghe spending more of his own time with them, than any other factor.

“I’m pleased A-Yuan likes human cooking,” Luo Binghe said, his chin resting on his folded arms while he watched Sha Yuan eat, like a creep.

If the food wasn’t so damn good, Sha Yuan might’ve given in to embarrassment and stopped eating. “Don’t fish for compliments, your demon cooking is incredible too.”

The stupid grin on his face was blinding. Sha Yuan focused on his dinner instead.

“When are you going to let me marry you?” Luo Binghe asked, with all the maturity of his youngest child as he poked Sha Yuan in the leg. “It’s been almost a year.”

Sha Yuan sighed at the complete lack of patience this man had, especially considering he’d spent years doing the opposite when he was plotting his revenge.

“If you’re still interested in fifty years, we can revisit it.” He scraped his bowl clean, ignoring the radiating heat from the most dangerous man in all the realms. “That glare doesn't work on me anymore.”

The glare intensified.

Sha Yuan rolled his eyes and put his feet in Luo Binghe’s lap, licking his spoon and enjoying the way Luo Binghe watched the movement with his intense, still glaring eyes. “I’m not

going anywhere," Sha Yuan said. "And it would be needlessly complicated on paper."

He also vaguely hoped by then he could be the *only* spouse without crucial political ties getting fucked up. But if he said that to Luo Binghe, they'd be married by the morning with the harem completely empty and no thought to the consequences.

Luo Binghe was still glaring, but he'd sat up so he could start rubbing Sha Yuan's ankles and legs at least.

"I know you understand the situation," Sha Yuan said, shifting in his seat as Luo Binghe's knuckles dug in to the muscle of his calf and slid down to his ankles. "I don't—" He caught his breath a little, ignoring the smug satisfaction on Luo Binghe's face as he started massaging his feet. Fuck this was supposed to be intimate not *intimate*. Why was everything he did so fucking seductive?

"I don't know why you're so insistent," Sha Yuan forced out, evenly.

Luo Binghe's jaw shifted, but he kept doing irresponsibly sexy things with his hands on Sha Yuan's feet. "You're mine."

"Not arguing," Sha Yuan said easily.

"I want that claim clear," Luo Binghe said, digging the pad of his thumb into the arch of Sha Yuan's foot.

He needed to regain his legs if he was going to have one to stand on in this argument. An attempt was made to pull them back which only caused Luo Binghe to reach out to hold Sha Yuan still by his hip. It was *infuriating* how hot that was.

"The people who courted you need to know I'll eviscerate them," he said, like that was a sensible and totally normal statement.

Sha Yuan was very not proud of the curl of heat that level of immature possessive nature wound its way through his stomach. He tried to focus on getting his legs back and continued to fail. "How do you even know who courted me?" Sha Yuan asked. It wasn't like there was a big list.

"Ling-er," Luo Binghe said, haughtily.

"Traitor," Sha Yuan muttered, then registered the other problem with that. "You do know that whole… accidentally leading people on thing wasn't serious, right?"

"I disagree," Luo Binghe said, tugging Sha Yuan forward by one leg and his hip so that he was straddling his lap.

Sha Yuan settled his hands on Luo Binghe's shoulders. "You can't blackmail me to marry you, because I'm concerned about half the Southern realm."

"Half?" Luo Binghe asked, darkly. His hands on Sha Yuan's hips tightened, flirting on painful. That also was unfortunately hot.

“I got into a lot of fights when I was younger,” Sha Yuan said, feeling flushed for multiple reasons. “My mother was too overprotective to let me do any real training.”

He stared at Luo Binghe’s dark, threatening glare and then remembered himself. “You! Fucked an absurd amount of people!”

He’d married most but not all of them.

Luo Binghe was still glaring and his hands were going to leave finger shaped bruises that Sha Yuan was going to pretend not to enjoy later.

“Ten years,” Sha Yuan said, flustered.

“One,” Luo Binghe countered.

“How is that fair? I just knocked mine down from fifty!”

“I increased mine from an hour,” Luo Binghe retorted.

One year was not nearly enough time to politically stabilize anything. It was a stupid, base instinct level, feral decision that Sha Yuan did not have to entertain.

“Fine,” Sha Yuan said. “A year.”

Luo Binghe’s glare shifted to a blindingly happy smile and he shoved his face into Sha Yuan’s chest as he squeezed the life out of him.

Sha Yuan petted his future husband’s hair wondering how much of the current year Luo Binghe was going to try and count into that wait time and if he had any ability to resist it.

[System notification!]

Sha Yuan mentally dismissed it. He thought he’d turned those off.

It came up again and then *again*, while Luo Binghe moved from happy embrace to squeezing his ass with one hand and starting to undress him with the other.

Fine. Sha Yuan thought. *Make it quick.*

[(〃＞ ᴗ ＜〃) Thank you host! The System would like to offer you an opportunity to help with another user’s side quest!]

Airplane or is there a third transmigrator? Sha Yuan asked, getting pretty distracted by where Luo Binghe’s mouth was going.

[User 002 has been unable to complete the quest: ‘A Frosty Romance’! User 002 would appreciate assistance.]

Huh. Sha Yuan would not have called that. He wasn’t sure he’d ever even seen Mobei-jun with a book. *Does he actually want assistance or are you tired of him not doing it?*

[The System does not put time constraints on elective side quests.]

That was not a no. *Yeah fine. I'll talk to Mobei-jun*.

[Thank you, Host! The System appreciates your participation! The System would also appreciate a good word put in with the Protagonist as there may be future forced plot deviations that would create—]

Sha Yuan waved the notification aside and mentally muted them again. He'd had long enough to think about the fact that Luo Binghe *manifested* his own happy ending, which was probably why Sha Yuan had gotten that character upgrade in the first place.

It didn't really matter. Sha Yuan wasn't a replacement and Luo Binghe wasn't *the Protagonist* so much as the man who was lifting Sha Yuan up with one arm to take them to bed.

It took every ounce of willpower he'd worked hard to earn for Sha Yuan not to cave and marry him tomorrow.

He held out a moderately respectful four months.

Chapter End Notes

> Sha Yuan finally meeting alt!universe Shen Qingqiu: …Fuck. That is me. Soulmates are real. I hate this.
> Original Luo Binghe: *smug forever*

End Notes

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